NEW WORLDS SCIENCE FICTION

No. 61
VOLUME 21
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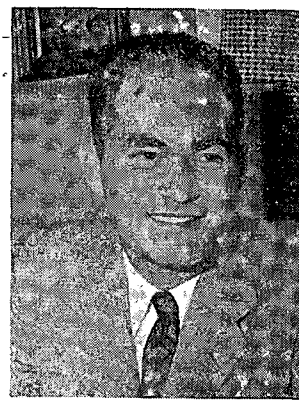

Richard Wilson

New York

With scores of short stories to his credit, one satirical novel, *The Girls From Planet Five*, published by Ballantine Books, and another novel under construction, Richard Wilson can well feel proud of his fictional achievements.

"More years ago than I care to recall," he writes, "when I was attending Junior High School, I found a fragment of newspaper on the floor under my desk during Latin class. It consisted of a news story torn almost directly down the middle from top to bottom so that the right half was missing. I placed the truncated cutting on a blank page of my notebook and pleasantly whiled away the rest of the Latin class by filling in words to connect each unfinished printed line to the beginning of the next.

"This was my first creative writing and after a while I naturally wondered if I could create a story without the drawback of having to make the end of the line join up with something someone else had written. So I tried, and I've been writing ever since.

"More than half the time I write on a salaried basis, for a global news agency which provided the background for my story "QRM." Nothing quite like the type of interplanetary interference therein described has happened to me as I sit in the New York office and edit the news for transmission to London, but as I handle factual stories about guided missiles and rockets and guarded forecasts about space travel I am convinced that the gap between my vocational fact-writing and my avocational fiction is gradually closing."

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MONTHLY

JULY 1957

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As Others See Us

Although British book publishers have made a great effort to popularise science fiction in recent years and have even managed to produce several outstanding novels—some few originals by British writers but mostly stories taken from the American field—the sad fact remains that they have not been one hundred per cent successful, as witness the big falling off of published titles during 1957.

There are many reasons for the decline and it would not be possible for me to put my finger on any one facet as the main cause. Let me this month, however, present the viewpoint of an Australian whose country relies almost entirely upon science fiction imported from Britain.

In the Editorial of his *Science Fiction News*, a bi-monthly journal printed in Sydney, Graham B. Stone writes : " Since publishers started deliberately issuing science fiction, some hundreds of books have appeared in the USA alone. Only a small number of these—and by no means a good selection—has had British publication. This is the direction in which most progress can be made if any British publisher wants to make progress. And they should, because their record so far is nothing to brag about.

" The reason why we get so much elementary and half-hearted writing, stuff that no magazine editor would consider good enough, is the idea (which makes a limited amount of sense) that there is only a small number of readers able to appreciate fully-developed modern science fiction, and therefore there is a need for something simpler for the unitiated. The fallacy here is that simplified fiction only creates a market for more and more simplification. Science fiction stands or falls on its contents, on ideas, on speculation. The present trend in British books is to avoid speculation—at all costs do not ask the reader to think about anything—by encouraging writers who are incapable of it.

" These feeble efforts by writers with no knowledge of the field are at least as difficult for the new reader as the most technical—although very few books assume much technical background, anyway—and are far less interesting. The approach is wrong. If an introduction to science fiction is needed, what could be better than the approach it actually had ?

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" Quite apart from the question of the books of the pioneers —though these are not as generally available as could be wished—there are many pre-war books which are unfamiliar in England today, which were written when there was no educated audience and which therefore had to explain rather than assume familiarity with their theories.

" Where is John Taine? We have seen his *Seeds Of Life* and *G.O.G.* 666 in the past two years, but these are far from being his best works. It would be more to the point to bring out *Before The Dawn* ; *Tomorrow* ; and *The Greatest Adventure*, for instance. Where is A. Merritt? His neglect is inexplicable. Only his last three novels have ever been printed in England, not only his poorest works but also quite different from the others. In America it would be hard to name another writer in the field who has had a comparable following. Since his death his popularity has continued steadily, if it had not indeed increased, and a new Merritt reprint now and then remains a safe bet.

" Colourful fantastic adventure with slight pretention to scientific speculation? True, but it certainly belongs in the field, to which it made a definite contribution and introduced many readers. Obviously it should have been a race to get into print first with *The Moon Pool* ; *The Metal Monster* ; and *Dwellers In The Mirage.* But we are still waiting.

" Similarly with Ray Cummings, Ralph Milne Farley, Victor Rousseau, S. Fowler Wright, Fred MacIsaac, George Allan England, to mention a few at random ; all wrote books that could well be made available to new readers. And in the meantime, while we are subjected to books by characters who have never written science fiction before, and obviously never read it either, there are books by Asimov, Bond, Clement, Heinlein, Williamson, Brown, Coblentz, Pohl and Kornbluth, E. E. Smith, Pangborn and de Camp, for example, which we have not seen and probably never will."

Mr. Stone's comments are more than reasonable, although I would hate to see some of the earlier " classics " published *in lieu* of new stories. No one thing remains static and literary trends are not an exception. A combination of the best of both early and current novels may well be the successful answer to a revival of interest in the book world.

But who shall be the judge of what constitutes the best?

John Carnell

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Some of the finest stories in science fiction have been based upon Man's endeavour rather than the scientific gadgetry he can produce. Kenneth Bulmer's latest story is just such an example—Man's grim determination to overcome a hostile environment and against overwhelming odds place his imprint on yet another page in the history books.

DEFIANCE

By Kenneth Bulmer

Illustrated by JACKSON

How either of the ships managed to land at all was a mystery to the survivors.

Even when they had contrived to pancake down on the inhospitable surface they couldn't believe their luck. After a while they began to revise that opinion drastically.

One minute they'd been advancing towards the planet as a well-integrated team of the Survey Corps and the next they'd been fluttering down, striving desperately to hold a sane landing path. Bits and pieces of both ships trailed disconsolately into the ground haze from their mutual impact.

The planet and its three moons spun brightly around their parent G-type sun. Nothing gave any indication that anyone —or anything—was in the slightest way interested that two Terran Survey Corps scouts had crashed. The Sun — old sol — was roughly a thousand light years away, which probably had something to do with it.

"Or else there just isn't anybody on the darn planet," surmised Commander Loftus Tait. He was a tall, thin, dry,

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professional spacer. He peered through the control blister at the ground, saw the nearness of it and the wreck of the tube venturis, and winced.

He wiped a smear of blood from his forehead and shouted across: " Hey, Sweeney. Tell me your equipment is working. Please."

Lieutenant Todd looked up from the shambles against the rear bulkhead. He shook his head. " Sorry, skipper. All shot. I'll tell you as soon as I can how long it will take to repair." His mouth was grim. " Maybe the radio is completely smashed. Maybe we won't fix it."

Tait didn't answer. Around him in the control room and down in the main engine compartment the crew of Scouter Ship *Outrider* were assembling themselves, sorting out the dead from the seriously injured. The medical team under the direction of Doc Bartlett were already hard at work giving what aid they could. The outside planetary atmosphere had rushed into the ship immediately on impact. As they were still alive and breathing, Tait decided that a large body of Standing Instructions for procedure on landing on newly discovered planets could be dispensed with.

The biggest job was to stay alive. *Outrider* seemed to have got herself down with enough damage to ensure she'd never lift jets again. Tait wondered about *Courageous*.

The last time he'd seen their sister ship was a few moments before the two scouters had collided. After that, he'd been too busily occupied to watch her any more.

" We'll fix the radio, Sweeney," he said with more confidence than he felt. " We have to put a signal through to *Saumarez* fast." *Saumarez* was the mother ship, orbiting a solar system three light years off whilst her brood of scouters explored what there was to find in a globe of space eight light years across.

It looked as though *Saumarez* was going to wait a long while for news of *Courageous* and *Outrider*.

At that moment Paddy McGilligan put his head into the control room and smiled. It was like someone opening up a searchlight. McGilligan was *Outrider's* executive officer: very efficient, very cheerful, very addicted to whisky.

" You bounced her, skipper," he told Tait. He came through into the control room, and whistled as he saw the shambles.

" What's it like below decks, Paddy? " Tait asked.

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" It isn't," McGilligan replied. " You wrote it all off." He turned to glare at Todd. " I suppose Sweeney's radio is as busted as I am before pay-day ? "

Todd nodded glumly.

" She must know where we are," Todd said a little desperately, keeping the quaver out of his voice by a tremendous effort. " She's bound to come looking for us."

Before Tait could speak, McGilligan said : " Where ? You'll have to face it, Sweeney. We aren't exploring out near Earth now, you know, where the stars spread thin. Here—" he gestured as only an Irishman can "—you've stars thicker than bars down O'Connell Street."

" So that sub-radio just has to work, Sweeney," Tait said gently. " It's up to you."

He turned away and nodded to McGilligan. The exec followed him to stand, balanced easily on the crazily tilted deck, near the view blister. They looked out.

" What a goddam dump," McGilligan breathed.

" Don't let it get you, Paddy," Tait advised with a hint of iron creeping into his words. " You've seen worse."

" Sure. Sure I've seen worse." The Irishman licked his lips. " But then we had a ship that could fly under us, and we weren't condemned to rot here ! "

" And we aren't condemned now, either ! What do you suppose happened to *Courageous* ? "

McGilligan shaded his eyes with his hand to stare out across the distant bubbling laval desert. " If she came down in that she's melted back to slag by now."

Tait looked. His eyes screwed up automatically. At once, he could sense the heat shimmering off there, where bloated bubbles rose through a sea of liquid magma, to burst and vomit a coppery gas that swirled widdershins before rising to join the sullen orange overcast of the sky. His mouth felt dry just looking at it.

" I hope she didn't," he breathed.

The ground dropped steeply away from the wrecked scouter, a jumble of boulders and crevasses and occasional gleams of exposed veins of ore, and beyond trailed away as a grey, scaley plateau until it reached the lip of the magma desert. That open stretch looked like hippopotamus' hide, flayed and left to bake under a merciless sun. Coils of vapour rose from it, cracks runnelled its surface and in those channels

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could just be seen the livid surface of the molten metal from the magma desert, creeping like sprawling arms of some primeval monster. Every now and then a thunderous crash echoed as part of the solidified surface flaked away and crumpled into the underlying fire.

"Nice place for a hot chestnut," commented a cheery new voice. Tait and McGilligan turned to see Lieutenant Commander Stafford rolling into the control room.

Tait nodded at Stafford's bulk and at the ship's precarious position.

"Don't rock the boat, Staff." It was an old rib. This time, the ship was in a position where it really wasn't funny anymore.

"Hyperdrive engines all right, skipper," Stafford said. "Put us outside the main gravitic flux of the planet and I'll get you home to *Saumarez* in a twinkling—"

"What about the tubes?" McGilligan broke in roughly.

Stafford raised his hands a fraction. "Shot. You know that. We couldn't raise a good sweat with them."

"Well, don't start talking about taking us back home in a twinkling—"

"That's it, gentlemen!" Tait broke in, his words icy. "Commander McGilligan, please check the crew for wounded and dead. Commander Stafford, come with me. I want to have a look at those drive tubes."

The two officers who were about to start slugging it out looked suddenly aware of what they were doing. They said: "Aye, aye, sir," and moved quickly away. Tait's quick orders had broken up a nasty situation; he wondered tiredly how long he could carry on. Once everyone was convinced they'd had it—what then? It was ridiculous to talk about mutiny and other abstracts like that. They were all in what, at the moment, appeared to be a position from which they wouldn't come out alive. It remained to be seen what guts and human ingenuity could contrive out of the situation.

Tait swung down the vertical shaft after Stafford, easily keeping up with the fatter man's laborious progress down the rungs. They were spaced wide apart, and each bar came easily under Tait's hands in the lessened gravity. He judged it to be about two-thirds to three-quarters that of Earth. A report would be coming up soon, he knew, along with other pertinent data of this hell-world. If Todd didn't fix that radio—they'd rot here, for sure.

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The emergency lighting showed the bottom of the shaft as a crumpled mass of metal looking like a screwed up square of silver-paper. Men were working down there. Men in anti-radiation suits. Through one side poked grimly a scarred finger of rock; the planetary rock they'd landed on had washed out the entire lower section of the ship.

" Tubes gone entirely, Staff," Tait said bitterly.

" If only we could launch this remaining section into space, outside the atmosphere and the field of force—"

" Don't torment yourself !" Tait deliberately made his words heavy and biting. " I'm depending on you, Staff. Keep up that cheerful face we all know !"

Stafford managed a smile. " It's all a front, skipper. You know that. Me, I'm scared as all hell."

" Aren't we all ? " Tait nodded down at the weirdly garbed anti-radiation crew. " Look at those grease-monkeys. They're looking to you, and me, for a lead, Staff. We can't fail them." He smiled and punched the other lightly on the bicep. "Anyway, Sweeney will probably fix the radio. I'm worried about *Courageous*."

Stafford's answer astonished him.

" *Courageous* ! The murdering idiots ! They swung right into us. I was watching them and saw the whole thing." Stafford pointed a finger at the ship's hull. " I saw them sideswipe us and then they spun off and went down over there somewhere. I'm not exactly sure where ; but I did notice they weren't heading for the lava. Then I got a little busy, and—"

" If you saw all that someone else may actually have seen them land !" Tait was becoming excited. " Maybe their radio is working ! I'm going back to the control room, you carry on down here. Check that radiation. We don't want any deaths from that if they can be prevented. Carry on !"

Stafford said " Aye, aye, sir," automatically; but Tait wasn't listening. He was clambering back up the rungs, cursing because the electric power for the lifts was out of action and hearing his heart thundering in his mouth. As soon as he was back in the control room he tried the intercom and, with a wash of relief, checked it out one hundred percent.

He blew the captain's attention call, and then began speaking.

" We're in a reasonably tough spot, men, as you know. However, everything is being done that can be done. Anyone who saw where *Courageous* fell, or who think they know,

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report to the bridge on the double. For the moment, that is all. I shall speak to you all again in a short while. Meanwhile, keep a high heart and carry on !"

Three crewmen swore they'd seen *Courageous* disappear into the haze. Their pointing hands confirmed what Stafford had said. One, a small, dyspeptic technician called Stoneman, added that he'd seen the ship "flatten into something green."

Tait wondered, for a moment, whether there was anything green on this hell-planet. Then he went with Stoneman towards the main airlock.

On this side of the ship the terrain was quite different from the molten lava and gobbets of evil gas thrown up on the other. The ship was perched, her stern crumpled in and giving her some support, on the knife-like ridge of rock between the laval desert on one side and a broad expanse of rolling, fissured, barren ground on the other. With the breathable amount of oxygen in the air there ought to be chlorophyll-photosynthetic type vegetation around. Maybe that was the 'something green' little Stoneman swore their sister ship had fallen into; maybe the ship had crashed into an emerald as big as the Isle of Man. Tait was prepared to believe almost anything in his present frame of mind.

The scorching wind, coming straight off the laval desert, dragged a broad coppery cloud out across the land in front. That swathe of heat appeared to be cut off cleanly by some invisible agency a few miles short of the horizon. Extending out from the ridge on which the ship perched, the ground resembled a builder's back-yard. Mounds and piles of rock and sand, boulders and slabs of pumice lay scattered everywhere. The whole landscape didn't make sense to Tait.

Stoneman pointed.

"Over there," his voice was assured in the earphones. "If we could go higher we could see a big patch of green. *Courageous* went down in that."

Tait squinted. The sun, partially obscured by tattered coppery clouds, was about at zenith. From prior observations, he knew that they had about fifteen or so hours to go before nightfall. But that terrain below didn't look in the least inviting. He checked direction with the compass, finding it to be east-south-east, using Earthly terminology on this alien planet's magnetic lines, which was standard Survey Corps procedure. He ducked back inside the ship.

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Tait was a man who liked to get at a problem by the shortest possible line. He took reports from the different heads of department aboard concentrating mainly upon those directly applicable to ship conditions. He checked with McGilligan, who reported, with Doc Bartlett, that of the complement of one hundred and ten men, twenty-three had been killed, fourteen injured seriously enough to demand hospitalisation. The tired lines in Tait's face sagged.

" All right, Doc, do what you can for them. Sims ? "

Pilot Sims gave a casual thumbs-up sign. " One of the fliers is okay. The others are scrap."

Tait breathed a sigh of relief. He hadn't relished the prospect of walking across that devil's landscape.

" Sims, you and Veonnegut and Kranski take a quick look over east-south-east. I want you to find *Courageous*. Get started !"

He was inundated with demands for decisions, orders, confirmation of actions, kept working at full speed for hour after hour. Tait was used to this life; he had to be. It was all part of a Survey Corpsman's life, although, at the moment, it all appeared reasonably futile.

And, of course, he wasn't organising the resources of a spaceship wreck on every unknown planet they touched, either.

When the final picture came out, at a restricted conference between Tait, McGilligan and Doc Bartlett, it merely confirmed what they had already known.

" Unless Sweeney gets that sub-radio working," Tait summarised, " we stay here." He looked at McGilligan. " What about supplies."

McGilligan looked uncomfortable. He said: " I was coming to them, skipper. Afraid we're short on almost everything. The water tanks ruptured, they picked up radioactivity as they flowed past the engines and contaminated the dry stores. We've a fair supply of concentrated stuff; but we're short on roughages."

Doc Bartlett looked up quickly, his face grave.

" That could be serious. We won't last very long as working men at that rate. We'll live for a bit, of course, but it might be easier on them if the men died off."

" Doc," Tait said, almost allowing what he felt to creep into his words. " Doc. We're going to find a way out. I don't know how, yet. But we will."

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"I wish I had your confidence," said Bartlett.

Someone gave a yell and pointed and the restricted conference broke up fast. The flier was coming back. skimming under the angry cloud, looking like some Earthly bird of the storm, screaming defiance at the gale.

"Yeah," said Pilot Sims casually. "I found her."

"She was flattened down in some green stuff, hey?" A voice blasted past Tait's ear, standing at the lock facing the incoming flier crew. He turned a quick look, realised Stoneman had shouted. The little guy wanted to be proved right.

"'Sright," Sims said. If he hadn't used up his gum allowance light years back he'd have been nonchalantly chewing. As it was, he had the fur collar of his short jacket turned up. A real glamour boy of the spaceways. "Looked like a forest, leastways, the stuff had burned where she'd ploughed in."

"Sims," Tait said patiently. "Your report, please."

"*Courageous* was jammed in under these trees, or big plants of some kind—"

Kranski, the biologist, cut in, breathing heavily.

"Multi-stemmed ferns, mainly, and allied low-order vegetation. I had a glimpse of many different forms of Pteridophyta, Filicales predominating, as was natural from the angle of observation, and—"

"Thanks, Kranski," Tait said, putting as much warmth as he could into his voice. "I'm well aware of the fascinating aspect of the flora; but I'd rather like to get at the condition of those men aboard *Courageous*."

Kranski looked quite startled. Then he got the idea. He said in a low voice: "Sorry. Carry on, Sims."

"Didn't see any signs of life. Flew backwards and forwards a few times, low as I could get. She's wedged well in, the trees—ferns, I guess—must be pretty damp. They'd burned right away where she struck, then, as she slid in, they were charred and then only broken down. Just caught a flash of light from her stern at the end of the cut."

"Nobody around you say?" Tait clasped his fingers in the small of his back. *Chapman, Keyes, Bill N'Gombi, Doc Tsu Chang, young Andy Whistler—all gone.* The Survey Corps took some pretty tough knocks, at times, poking around alien, unknown dangerous planets. Only, this time, it had been their own damn silly fault . . . He straightened and put a rasp into his voice.

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" All right. We'll have to send a party across there right away. They'll have time at least to land in the broken area. That possible, Sims ?" At the pilot's nod, Tait went on evenly: " Then they'll have to do what they can before the daylight goes. Paddy ? You'd better be in charge. Take who you want. If it's too rugged to get back before nightfall you'll have to bivouac in the wreck."

" Wilco, skipper," McGilligan said quietly. He began telling off his men. Tait gestured to Doc Bartlett and the two men went down to the sickbay. By the time they came out, Tait was conscious of a boiling fury welling inside his chest. The sheer damned stupidity of it all !

Lieutenant Todd came up just then to report, and Tait said: " Well, Sweeney ? That radio of yours working yet ?"

Todd was taken aback by the skipper's tone. His young face tensed.

" No, skipper. It won't work again." His eyes were full of misery. " But I've cannibalised a couple of the normal radios. We can put a set in the flier and keep in touch with the party over there."

Tait looked at him. The taut lines around his tired eyes softened. " That's good work, Sweeney. I didn't think the sub-radio would work. Just keep your fingers crossed that you can cannibalise parts from *Courageous*."

" Wilco, skipper," Todd said. He brightened a little.

Working at top speed they installed the repaired radio after removing the smashed set from the flier. Then McGilligan and his crew stepped aboard and pilot Sims took the little craft up and away in a dramatic climb.

" Always in front of the TV cameras, that Sims," Stafford grumbled good-humouredly. There was a clue there, Tait saw, as he climbed back to the control room. The team was good. No-one was going to let down the side. Not with Loftus Tait looking at them, anyway. Tait only hoped he wouldn't be the first to crack. He swung into action again, organising a complete ration system, ably assisted by Stafford. As the alien sun dropped towards the horizon it became bloated and angry, glaring through the thick, clouded atmosphere. Tait organised a ration system on the lighting, power was scarce. Shadows built up in unexpected corners.

A crewman, at watch at the single remaining working radio, reported: " Pilot Sims calling from flier, sir."

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Tait knuckled his eyes and went across, to stand hands gripping the chair back, listening intently to the words chattering, static ridden, from the speaker. He felt the weight of the catastrophe fall on him then, in that moment of sudden quietness and waiting.

"We're down safely, in a small clearing that she knocked for us. These ferns are sure big. The ground's all spongy and rubbery; but it'll take plenty of weight. Doc Bartlett and Lieutenant Todd and the scientists have gone in. Commander McGilligan sent back a runner for them."

"Must have missed some of his transmission," Tait said. "Must have contacted *Courageous* already and now they're all going in. If they want Doc, there must be someone still alive. It's the only reason he went along."

Sims was saying: "A runner coming now. Hold on." There were chinking sounds from the speaker. Tait swallowed. "Yeah, it's Piasceki. He looks pretty green. Maybe it's these ferns, they spread out overhead like umbrellas. Here he is." More clinking and a sudden crash and rattle from the speaker.

"Report to the cap'n from Commander McGilligan." Piasceki's voice was unsteady from running. "Only ten survivors. Doc Bartlett working on them now. One officer, nine ratings. Lootenant Todd's stripping down the radio."

"Can't we get a word in?" Tait asked impatiently.

"Not until they switch to receive, sir," the tech said. "Not enough working equipment to rig a two-way channel." He bent forward. "Here they come now.".

"Sims here," crackled the speaker. "Instructions requested. Over."

"Captain here," Tait said slowly, marshalling his thoughts. "What is the condition of *Courageous*? Over."

"She slid in, sir. Wiped off her control sections, that's where the majority of casualties occurred. Her stern didn't sustain appreciable damage. No scientists of her crew survived. Hold it! I can see movement—yes—couple of men. They're carrying something—they've got a wounded man. Bringing him to the flier."

Tait pounded one fist into the other. "Why in hell doesn't he let me ask him some questions?"

Stafford, his rubicund face shining with sweat, had come to stand quietly behind Tait. Now, he said: "Ten survivors only, skip. She must have been a nasty sight."

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The speaker blared over that. " Message for the captain from Doc Bartlett. Request permission to bring in ten wounded personnel. Over."

" Yes. Tell Doc to bring 'em in, if they can be moved. Pilot Sims ! I want a full report from Commander McGilligan on the condition of the ship's after sections and tubes. Tell Lieutenant Todd to break down anything he wants to get his radio working again. It doesn't look as though you're going to make it back here tonight, so you'll have to bivouac in the ship." Tait paused and flicked a glance at Stafford. He went on grimly: " It may not be pleasant. I don't want any of you wandering about in those ferns at night. There may be dangerous forms of nocturnal life. Watch it. Any comments ? Over."

The voice from the speaker was the firm, heavily rolling voice of Doc Bartlett. He said: " I understand your problem, skipper. But I don't think there is any life here. And I want to get these men back to my sick bay, the one here is slashed to ribbons. Oh, and we should be safe enough landing and taking off at night. Over."

From anyone else that would have been insubordination. From Doc it was the sweetest of good sense.

" Well, don't take any chances. Remember, we're getting off this dump. Any news from Paddy or Sweeney ?" Tait waited, then remembered to say: " Over."

" Yes. Sorry, skip. Sweeney says this radio is in worse shape than ours." There was a slight pause, Tait guessed Doc left it for him to swear in. Then: " Paddy is climbing all over the fins and tubes, he'll rupture himself if he isn't careful. This ship surely made a mess coming in. I'll be seeing about shifting those casualties. Here's Sims. Over."

" Righto, Doc," Tait said. " Sims, use your judgment coming in under those ferns and watch it ! That's the only flier we've left."

Tait didn't bother to say ' Over,' he went back to his cabin, the beginnings of a crazy, impossible, but just incredible enough scheme to be successful whirling in his mind. His eyes felt like frying tomatoes. His mouth was parched. Quite apart from fatigue, it must be this scorching wind blowing from the magma. He'd done all he could so far; the rest of the crew were getting their heads down. Doc would still be working away, bringing out the casualties. He ought to get a little sleep, start fresh about midnight.

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Throughout the rest of that thirty-hour night he was working in fits and starts, brought abruptly awake after a doze when a fresh group of the injured were brought in.

Along towards morning, or when the clocks said morning was due, the flier, piloted on its last two trips by Pilot Lanning, brought back McGilligan and Todd.

"What a mess," McGilligan said, rubbing his hands. The motion made Tait aware of the vague chill in the air. The far walls and bulkheads of the ship were lit by the lurid glow from the magma and its hot breath had crisped them most of the night. But a thirty hour night was bound to grow a little chilly towards dawn.

"Radio, Sweeney?" Tait asked.

"Kaput. I poked around, looking for any components that might help; there's not enough between the two sets and sub-radio spares to make a crystal set."

"All right." Tait thrust radios from his mind. "Paddy—whereabouts does the damage finish?"

"Oh—you mean—well, she's got all her stern venturis and pumps and tanks and there was no dangerous level of radiation." He shook his head. "But, from her hyperdrive room on, whew—that's nobody's business."

Tait took a pace or two away, his hands clenched in the small of his back. The magma fire on his face brought out the deep vertical lines between his eyebrows and set a bright star in each eyesocket. He made up his mind.

"Paddy—*Courageous* and *Outrider* are sister ships, aren't they? And Staff says if we get outside atmosphere our hyperdrive engines will take us back home to *Saumarez*? And *Courageous* is sitting there with her drive tubes intact? Well, what are we waiting for?"

McGilligan pushed his cap back.

"Skip—you're not thinking? Oh, no! You haven't seen the country! It's like a dog's teeth all the way."

"You've been there and back."

"Sure. Aboard a flier."

"What else are we going to do? Stay here and rot?"

"Since you put it so tactfully, skipper," said McGilligan. "I'll grant you're right, this time, sure I will."

They looked at each other, and at Stafford, who had just joined them. Then they all burst into laughter. They stood there in the airlock, hearing the scorching wind slither past the outer skin of the ship, and laughed like drains. Doc

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Bartlett, coming to find out what was holding them up, drew his eyebrows down severely. They told him what they were going to do. And old Doc joined the laughter. It was highly probable, Tait recognised, that he saw in it an essential safety valve. The human nervous system and brain had thought up automation long before the human body was off all fours.

By the time the sun was four degrees above the horizon, the crew of *Outrider* were hard at it, like a milling crowd of ants on a piece of bacon rind. Tait had gone off personally to see *Courageous*. He didn't exactly feel hungry—the pills had taken care of that—but he wasn't exactly well-fed, either. Lack of roughage, Doc Bartlett said. It wouldn't be too noticeable for a while yet.

He stared above at the fern covering. The things were big, all right. Leading away, at first like a tunnel, then a cutting, was the track made by the ship. It began under the stern tubes and went, straight as an arrow, across the spongy ground and finished where there was a smeary mass of metal wreckage ripped from the bow as she struck. The demarcation line between the two types of country was very distinct. Above the bare, barren plateau that began at the ridge where *Outrider* was perched stretched that dun angry cloud. Here, above the fern forest, the sky was clear blue, lightly stippled with white cloud. A primeval world.

It was cooler, moister, too. A crew had arc cutters busy on the hull of *Courageous*, with Stafford perched high on the wreck directing operations. McGilligan, wiping his forehead, came climbing up from the cut.

"Well, skip. We've started."

"How long for you to cut the tail section free?"

"Give me ten hours. That'll see it completely separated. Might even have some of the tubes dismantled."

"We'd better start figuring the best way to dispose of the loads. If we only had a tractor, even—"

McGilligan grunted. "Might as well ask for an antigrav wrecker, I suppose. Hell—why did the two ships have to crash so far apart?"

"We're lucky." Tait nodded his head. "The altitude we collided, she might have fallen half-way round the globe. Ten miles is chicken feed."

"Some chicken." McGilligan coughed and spat. "Okay, skipper. One thing, the crew's full of fight. Let's hope the grub holds out."

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"It will," Tait said. "It has to."

He walked away over the spongy ground, head up, hands locked in the small of his back. McGilligan stared after him, shook his head, smiled, and went back to driving the crew again.

Tait called Pilot Sims over.

"Flier still functioning satisfactorily?"

"Yes, sir. Little oil leakage; fixed it with some adhesive. Where to, sir?"

"Low over the ground, Sims," Tait said, hoisting himself into the flier. "And take it slowly. I want to study the ground. This piece of terrain is pretty important."

Just how important it was, was brought home more forcibly to Tait the further they flew. Along this narrow track he intended to transport an entire lower section of a spaceship, using the power of mens' muscles. It was an impertinent decision to make; as though he had disagreed with the gods or blind fate and was out to carve his own destiny. He usually had, before; but this was somehow different. The ground was hard, stony, with innumerable fissures striating the surface.

Tait cocked his head up. The ground rose gradually to the ridge, the last half mile or so going pretty steeply upwards. From this altitude he could see the ridge trailing away in a great circle, to vanish over the horizons. So it was a crater, then.

If that boiling magma was anything to go by, the crater was the live throat of a volcano. Nice thought.

Tait leaned forward. His body went tense.

"Down!" he said gruffly. Sims shot the flier towards the ground, landing on a bare patch ringed with boulders. He'd seen what had drawn Tait's attention.

The crevasse was a good twenty feet across. It stretched at right angles to the track Tait was mapping. He picked up a stone and tossed it in. He gave up waiting for it to strike. He jerked his head at Sims and turned back. At the second stride he heard a faint, far-away clink from the crevasse.

After the first fifty foot it wasn't important how deep the gash was.

Rising again above the ground, Tait noticed that the heat returned. The ridge must cut off most of it down below. He told Sims to circle round. Looking carefully, below, he saw

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at once that if they wanted to detour the crevasse they'd have to make a march four times as long as going straight across. Tait grew thoughtful.

The more difficulties that appeared in his way the more determined he became to overcome them. It wasn't impossible to sling equipment across a ravine. He remembered tales of primitive rope bridges across gorges in the Himalayas and Peru.

"Back to *Courageous*," he told Sims.

McGilligan was stripped to the waist. He looked as though he had stepped straight from a Turkish bath; his body was running sweat. His men were toiling steadily, not like maniacs, but chewing through the work, cutting the ship in two and freeing the after sections from the shambles up front.

"Paddy," Tait began at once. "Get some men on dismounting some tubes and pump gear right away. You can carry on cutting free at a slower rate. I want to get some parties started on the road back to *Outrider*."

"Wilco, skipper," McGilligan said. His chest gleamed. He waved his arm and shouted and bosun's mates started their crews on the fresh work. Sledges were fashioned from sections of hull and drag lines attached. Looking back, like a polar explorer at his team of huskies, Tait smiled bleakly.

"All right, then. Let's start in."

Later on, Tait knew he would wake screaming from nightmares at the sheer horror of that trek. They harnessed themselves to the drag ropes, padded with scraps of cloth. Tait himself hitched up to the number one team. The wires led back to the sledges bent and hammered from plating, splayed out so that four men could lean into the haul abreast.

On the sledges rested lashed-down tubes, pumps and auxiliary equipment. They had perhaps a tenth of the total material to be hauled. After the first three hundred yards across the spongy soil, sinking unsteadily at each stop, Tait knew they'd never make it like that. There was too much weight on each sled for four men. He hauled up short, panting, his uniform shirt clinging to his body.

The others stopped in line. He ripped his shirt off, tossed it on the rocket tube on the sled. "Paddy!"

"Skipper?"

"This is no good. When we hit the rock we might stand a chance with four men. Not here. Harness up again. Ten

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men to a sled. Leave the others here, we'll come back for them when we have the first ones onto the solid ground."

They sorted themselves out, hitching up more drag lines to each sled. Then ten men leaned into the task. They swayed and slipped, rose and fell on the soggy ground like drunken men on a tightrope. The heat and dampness here under the ferns was overpowering. What it would be like when they were out on the plateau, Tait didn't care to think about. No damp—but the heat . . .

The wire was cutting into his chest, the cloth didn't seem to make the slightest difference. He thrust down with his legs, making a definite pump with each step, each one a victory in itself. Slowly, the sledges moved across the swampy ground.

There was a roaring in his head and at first, when his feet scraped against rock, he didn't believe it. Only when the sled surged forward more easily and set up a high scratching, did he realise they'd reached the plateau. He dropped the wire and held up his hand.

The crew dropped to the ground and lay panting, for all the world like husky dogs after a stiff run. Tait struggled back down the line to find McGilligan.

Looking over the exec's head, he was shocked to see *Courageous* so near. It seemed they'd travelled miles.

"We'll be worn out wrecks at this rate," McGilligan greeted him.

Tait nodded, unable to speak. He swallowed and then licked his lips. "We'll make it Paddy. The first trip is always the worst."

"Yeah," was all that McGilligan could find to say.

Tait said: "Take half," he stopped, swallowed again and shook his head. "Take half the men and go back for the other sleds. They might sink through, although it's unlikely. But we can't chance it. *Courageous* herself seems safe enough; but that ground we came over seemed far too insubstantial."

"Wilco," McGilligan said tiredly.

"*Don't crack up on me, Paddy,*" the words formed in Tait's head. God ! If Paddy, his main strength, wilted . . . .

Tait organised four men to a sled and tried them again; it was very clear, frighteningly obvious, that four men just couldn't do it. He harnessed up eight men and they began their laborious procession once more.

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Now he had to arrange the right number to the sleds, close up the remainder and leave some sleds by the rocky rim. The rest were slowly dragged across the stony soil towards the ridge where *Outrider* perched like a drunken owl.

He was busily working out schemes to couple the two halves of the ship together when the front sled stopped. Tait, who had worked round to sled three in the rota system, dropped his wire and walked forward. He stood for a long moment, almost beaten, staring wide-eyed.

He'd completely forgotten the chasm.

He roused himself. " All right. Sweeney ! Hike back to *Courageous*. Take half the crewmen. Have an hour breather when you get back and then start hauling those sleds. Move!"

Very soon there would be a pile-up at the crevasse. Moodily, he kicked a stone into the depths. Tackle. Girders from the wreck, improvised blocks. The labour stretched out before him with appalling immensity. They could all stay here and rot. Be a lot easier. He moved his shoulders wearily and began to talk to McGilligan.

In the end they had most of the improvised blocks and tackle and slings at the crevasse before the rest of the sleds arrived. They set up a tripod, and Sims in the flier carried the first wire across. That preliminary, at least, could be aided by science.

Tait cocked an eye at the flier. " How much weight could she carry if we stripped her down, Paddy ?" he asked.

McGilligan grimaced. " I'd worked that out. She's taking everything she can carry. The tubes and pumps and pile will have to be manhandled."

And manhandled they were. The men swung like trapeze performers to swing the stuff across on the wire, hauling in with a will and watching each swaying, gyrating piece of equipment across as though it were traversing the pits of hell. Which it was, in a fashion.

Tait checked the wire for fraying after each journey, and had it renewed once. All the time the alien sun beat down. Life became a nightmare. Step after step. Haul and pull and sweat. Gradually, the work became measurably harder. Tait stopped, wiped sweat from his eyes and stared.

They had reached the foot of the escarpment. It stretched before them, running in a curve out of sight on either hand. Near the top, standing like a watch tower, stood the streamlined form of *Outrider*.

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Tait just stood and looked, chilled to the marrow.

He'd not realised, seeing the perspective from the flier, just how far up and away the ship was. She was standing on the wreck of her stern tubes, two fins ripped off, the third supporting her at an angle. She was as high as a mountain to the men below. And the screes between were sharply tilted and impossible to climb dragging the sleds.

And, even if they reached her, they couldn't work on her up there. They could never fix the stern of *Courageous* to the bows of *Outrider*, balanced on a knife edge of rock.

Pilot Lanning brought the flier to land in a flurry of dust. Tait ordered the men to relax. That was a laugh. Lanning was despatched with orders to bring food and drink: Tait had decided to camp the men out down here, shielded from the magma lake. It was simpler to bring down blankets and essentials than to lift the men back to the ship. When they had slept, they would start back for the other loads.

What with the thirty-hour day and thirty-hour night—the ship had come down near the equator—and the continual hauling work, slogging backwards and forwards from one ship to the other, time became a confused and crazy turbulence. Tait lost all sense of it. Yet he recognised in himself signs that he was becoming tireder and more easily worn out every meal time. The lack of roughage was serious.

Doc Bartlett had found some undamaged sacks of flour and the men had good white bread for a short time, courtesy *Courageous*. But that supply was soon gone. Tait decided that they would have to shift the pile next. If they left it too late they might not have the strength. It was the bulkiest and heaviest piece of equipment, and it couldn't be stripped down.

Luckily, it was only a second-grade pile, using sandwiched shielding, and of light construction for the jets. The main pile, supplying power to the ship and the hyperdrive engines, was a massive affair. Stafford had reluctantly negatived Tait's suggestion that the main pile could be used for the jets. The design of the scouters didn't allow that.

And time was running out.

He called Kranski in. The biologist met him at the edge of the fern forest, his face puckered in thought.

Tait kicked a fern trunk.

His foot partially crushed the stem and sap oozed.

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" Pyramids," Tait was saying to himself. Seeing Kranski, he said: " Kranski. What chance is there of finding hardwood around here ? I want rollers."

Kranski shook his head. Tait knew he would; but nonetheless it was a disappointment.

" I figure this is a carboniferous period, these ferns will pack down to make coal. All planets don't have to follow exactly the Earth's evolution; but I don't think you'll have hardwood trees on this planet for some time yet."

" Fossils ?" Tait asked desperately, hoping.

Kranski looked puzzled. " Well, now you mention it, below the crust of fibre and gunk I've come across an occasional fern trunk that might be useful—"

He was almost swept off his feet by Tait.

" Where ? Come on, man. If we can find rollers we can shift the pile casing easily. Well, fairly easily."

They got most of the men at the fern site upon the task. As Tait told Kranski: " This is vital. There is absolutely nothing aboard ship with the bulk or compactness for a suitable roller. We want something with a good size diameter. We've got to find a solid trunk ! "

At a point a hundred yards or so off from the main swathe cut through the ferns, a small trickle of warm water ran through mossy banks to lose itself in the swamp farther out. As the water trickled from the stony waste, originating in a blowhole, probably, it carried minerals and salts down with it, in time to form the salty oceans of this world. At a number of points, the ferns had fallen into the stream. The water had trickled around them in the course of time.

Kranski whooped and pointed.

Tait and McGilligan, surprising themselves, ran for it and stood panting on the stream bank. Tait, very gingerly, very carefully, kicked a trunk half buried in the ooze. It rang hard.

Two hours later they had that trunk out, harnessed up and were dragging it painstakingly out and across to the stoney plateau. By the time they had collected four hardened trunks —they smashed three of them, the petrified stuff flying in heart-breaking chaos—a whole working period had passed.

They brought the trunks in through the swathe in the fern forest and aligned them in front of *Courageous.*

When the men had rested, everyone, without exception, was gathered around the pile. Then began the performance of the

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near impossible. They jacked the square bulk out, inching across the smashed plating, riding it on the metal deck. They guided it down onto the first roller, teams of men hauling with rhythmical heaves on the lines.

As the weight came on the trunk, steadily, without impact that would have shattered, Tait held his breath.

Slowly, the roller sank, something screeched, a rank rotting smell puffed up. Then a wild yell burst from the crew as the pile slide forward under its own momentum. With a breath-taking rush it rolled forward onto the second roller, the retaining lines tautened, men slid and cursed as they were dragged through the mud after it, and then it came to rest halfway across the third petrified trunk. Tait brushed greasy fingers down his face and let his breath out in a whooshing sigh of relief.

"Made it! By God, we made it!"

But that, as he had known, was only the beginning.

The rest of the journey was bedlam, inferno, nightmare. They hauled the pile gingerly from roller to roller. Then a crew pounced on the rearmost roller as it came free, carried it around the pile and aligned it in front, ready to take the massive bulk as it slid ponderously forward. Tait and McGilligan danced around, ensuring that a smooth, steady progression was maintained.

Halfway to the stone plateau it began to rain.

No-one took the slightest notice. Dripping with warm water, they were like mud-splashed demons, struggling and slipping through the muck. Tait prayed they'd reach solid ground before the water bogged down all progress.

Coming to the edge of the rock they smashed two rollers in the abrupt change of conditions. They flew to splinters as the pile crushed down on them.

"She won't do it on the rock!" someone yelled.

"Yes she will!" Tait shouted back, exhausted, defiant, refusing to accept defeat. "Back for more rollers!"

The men plunged again into the ooze of the forest. They tore the petrified fern trunks from the river bed, smashed one, dragged two triumphantly back to the pile.

This time they wrapped each roller top in cloth as the pile's weight came on it. Then a fractional movement forward. The cloths dropped free.

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" Stop !" roared Tait. Before anyone else could think, he crawled under the pile, horribly conscious of all that awful weight above him, clawed the rags away. Freed from that obstruction the pile moved on under the pull of ropes.

The next roller was cushioned. The pile edged forward. This time McGilligan stopped, obstructed Tait, and crawled under. He came out with the rags between his teeth, looking like a chimney-sweep's boy. The pile moved on.

Literally inch by inch, they shifted it. Before they reached the crevasse, Tait inspected the bypass, directed the toiling mass of near-humanity to their new direction. On the turn a roller splintered. The pile crashed to the ground, pulverising the other roller beneath it.

For a long moment no-one spoke.

Then Tait said: " All right. We fetch new rollers."

Kranski was saying something about ' if they last out.' Tait turned on him.

" There's a whole planet ! We'll tear the whole forest apart if necessary ! We're taking this load of junk to the ship—and nothing's going to stop me !"

Then they were staggering back to the swamp, plunging to the river, prising new rollers free. They floundered back, eyes staring, chests heaving. This was an epic. This was something for the story-books.

Something had got into the men. They were acting now as though this planet bore them a personal grudge. They were determined to beat it, to show it just who these men were who had dropped down from the stars. Tait sensed that feeling, rejoiced in it; it struck sparks from his own mood.

McGilligan had the tripod arranged by the time they got back to the pile. With immense effort they lifted the front end, squeezed a roller beneath, cushioned it with rags, let the weight come on. They tracked the long way round the crevasse. They struck out again for the escarpment.

And, as Tait had known they must, they reached it. The flier had brought all the controls, the lighter equipment across. Only four more tanks to be brought—and they were light compared to the other items—and everything would be neatly lined up below *Outrider*.

The men ate and rested. The tanks were brought.

Looking up at the ship—his ship—squashed down on its stern so high above, Tait was reminded of an ice-cream cone, carelessly plunged downwards, the cream spreading out from the wrecked cone.

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Around him on the bare ground were the pieces of stern identical with those above—only these were unbroken, if fitted to that bow they could lift his ship out to the stars.

He began to draw with a pencil on his pad. McGilligan came to stare over his shoulder. Stafford and Todd came to join him. Someone said: "It could work. You know—it could work!"

He sounded like someone who has seen a divine revelation.

Tait said stiffly, his jaws aching: "It will work." He rubbed his bristly chin. He finished matter-of-factly: "It will work. It has to work."

He looked up suddenly, conscious that it was becoming difficult to see the paper. He wondered if he were going blind. Then he saw the sun was sinking. He stood up.

"In the morning—thirty hours time—gentlemen."

"Wilco, skipper," they said. They all knew, as did Tait, that what they had done so far was as nothing compared with what they were about to attempt.

During the night there were some inexplicable whistling sounds. These were immediately followed by large bangs and spectacular fireworks from the plain. For a wild instant Tait thought that *Saumarez* had come for them and was firing signal rockets. He brushed the fantasy away.

The only way they'd get off this hell-planet was by their own efforts.

He went out to watch. The magma desert, the volcanic crater, was taking a hand in the game. It was vomiting chunks of lava and rock, bombarding them. At that moment, standing there in an alien landscape, Tait had the thought that men weren't really wanted out here among the stars. He had the men working early. They brought explosive charges from stores and pegged them in a nicely calculated line from the plain up the ridge wall to the ship's stern. McGilligan, his body a deep mahogany from sun and exposure, checked and reported to Tait.

"All set to fire, skip." He gestured. "If we don't bring the whole shenanigan down on our heads."

Tait smiled and essayed an experimental jab. He said: "We might blow a hole through the ringwall—let the magma flow out over us."

McGilligan's level stare regarded him. "I'd thought of that, skipper. Most of the goo was semi-solidified up near the ridge—cooled off into scales."

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Tait didn't answer, walked tiredly away to where men were assembling in the cover of a rocky outcrop. So old Paddy was taking remarks like that seriously! Tait wondered who was growing old first. He felt convinced his hair was white.

McGilligan shouted. The plunger went in. The ground shook. A plume of dirty brown dust shot from the scarp and rocks and stones rolled crashingly downwards. The noises seemed very minor compared with the volcanic spite of the darkness.

"She didn't move, thank God," Tait said.

"Not for a good few more shots yet," McGilligan said. He spat dust. "I'll get the crews started in again."

"Skipper!" Doc cut in savagely. "Look at your hands, your feet, your chest! I ought to discipline you!"

Tait looked stupidly. He hadn't noticed the cuts from the wire and the gashes of the rock when they'd been made. His body was a roadmap of weals and contusions. He said: "Everybody's like this, I guess." He licked his lips.

Bartlett dragged him across to his first-aid chest and began work, tight-lipped. "You're feeling about done up, hey, skipper? Here—" He pulled Tait further into the medic shelter and rummaged in a locker. He drew out a parcel, unwrapped paper, revealing a round, flat, doughy looking cake.

Beaming all over his face, he thrust it at Tait.

"You're the skipper," Bartlett said. "You need the extra roughage from this cake I made from the flour in *Courageous*. Been keeping for just such an occasion."

Tait knew what to say, through the emotions that caught at him. The trouble was, he didn't know how to say it.

"Look, Doc," he said gently. "I appreciate this. God knows I do. But I'm just a man, I can't take any more than any other man with me in this spot. I've been on normal crew allowance—and I'm staying on it." He couldn't meet Doc's eyes, anticipating the shamefacedness, the misery there. "Just put the cake with the general rations."

Doc emitted a roar. He was almost foaming at the mouth with rage. "You may be skipper of this ship, skipper, but I'm the doctor! I want to get back to Earth alive! And I've got sense enough to know that the one man who's going to get me back there safely is the skipper! So my job is to see that the one man we all rely on doesn't crack-up! So I do." Doc thrust out a stiff finger and prodded Tait's chest.

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"And what does that danged fool do? Refuses doctor's orders! Imperils the lives of everyone through sheer cussedness!"

He went on like that. About Tait's example being worth more to the men than the infinitesimal amount of cake they'd each receive if it was divided up. Tait seized the cake and stuffed some in his mouth and ran.

Over his shoulder, his mouth full of sweet dough, he shouted fluffily: "Clear everyone out the ship. Everyone. She may bounce some."

He finished half the cake. Licked his fingers. It was good, damn good. Yeah, he felt better already—or was that cussed psychology again? Damn old Doc, anyway. Putting him in a spot like that. He prowled around until everyone had been cleared out and then found McGilligan and the two of them sat comfortably together, their backs wedged against one of the fuel tanks from *Courageous*. He felt tired, and knew from the superhuman exertions of McGilligan that the Irishman must be exhausted. Tait looked at him from the corner of his eye.

"You all right, Paddy?"

"Sure." The whisper was hoarse, dry. "Surely. Just so's we get the ship down on this benighted plain and stick her together again." McGilligan coughed.

"Here," Tait said roughly. "Eat this. That's an order."

He thrust a half of Doc Bartlett's cake at McGilligan.

The exec took it, his Irish eyes slanting up to stare at Tait. "Sure and all—" he began. Then he wolfed it like a caged lion eating a shoulder of mutton.

Later still, when darkness put a stop to further blasting, the men crawled thankfully to their blankets. Tait, moving restlessly about among the jumble of rock thrown up by the explosions, felt frustrated. He was uncomfortably aware of the passage of time. When they'd been slipping and struggling to bring the stern across here it had been all fire and drive and fight. Now, with this waiting, this careful, methodical blowing away of rock and earth, he felt his tensed nerves uncurling, like petals after rain, and he cursed his own stupidity unavailingly. He knew that the last part of this epic would be more gruelling, more sheer hell, than anything so far achieved.

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During the thirty-hour night he had the men up in shifts digging and clearing rubble with what spades they had and crude implements they could make from bits of metal.

The crater spewed again, splashing the plain in gobbets of fire and house-size boulders.

With the coming of daylight, angry orange-red and promising only more toil, Tait rose wearily and led the men up the ridge along the narrow scoop they had cut. The nearer they approached *Outrider*, the more crazy appeared the scheme. Presently they were standing directly underneath the wreckage,

During the rest of that morning they cut the wrecked lower sections free and let them tumble away. The big job was bringing the forward section down intact to the plain. It wouldn't be easy. Men swarmed all over the semi-ship, digging, gouging, easing her bottom out into the trough leading down. They cut gingerly at the lip of the trench. Todd and Stafford were working away at the stones and rubble, Tait and McGilligan stood beneath, eyes cocked, watching and estimating.

A wild shout from above arrested their attention.

The tiny figures of men could be seen leaping away in every direction. The hull shivered, like a dog before the fire. Earth and dust puffed up. Noise screeched in a bad-tempered whine.

Tait and McGilligan scrambled in a flurry to climb out of the cut and as men handed them out they could feel the earth begin to tremble. They stood, tense, consumed with anxiety, watching the bows of *Outrider*.

Like a crocodile taking the water down a muddy, well-worn groove, the ship slid stern-first below the ridge. Her control sections above rotated slowly. Metal screamed. She slithered down the blasted-out trough, for all the world like a drunken man sliding helplessly down a lamp-post.

" Pray those ports hold—" Tait breathed.

" Some clumsy fingered oaf started her off—" McGilligan was swearing to himself. Presently he began to pray. The ship picked up speed, spraying rocks. Stafford had a blood-stained bandage around his forehead.

" You look damned dramatic, Staff !" McGilligan greeted him. " What the hell happened up there ? "

" Sorry." Stafford was still shaking. " The whole caboodle just busted loose."

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Tait laughed. "And I planned to ease her down a foot at a time!" His voice was almost drowned in the crashing uproar. It was like avalanche time in the Alps.

After a time, the ship's hull came to rest against a slight gradient and she stopped. Dust poured away from her for a while and pebbles bounced along her flanks. Then silence hurt their ears.

"Well, let's see what's left." They moved in and gave the ship as thorough an overhaul as they could. Some damage, inevitably, had been done. But nothing that could not be repaired. Tait, strangely, did not feel relieved. He had a sense of destiny—he knew they were going to make it. No-one else, not even Paddy, really, had that dedicated feeling of success. Tait wondered if it was his half of Doc's cake.

From then on they did ease her down. Carefully, foot by foot, they scraped the rock away, letting the hull sink that amount and then stopping to check, before beginning again to chip away at the ground under her. It was a painful business.

The second time she got away from them she slid a distance of ten yards. Everybody was relaxing—McGilligan was saying: "If she's as good going up as she is at going down . . ." —when they heard Todd saying that six men had been killed in the slide. That stiffened them. They went at the job with sullen, vengeful digs at the alien ground, as though willing it to strike back. They dug away, let the hull ease gently forward, then chipped away again.

To Tait, they reminded him vividly of a scene. He knew he, nor anyone else alive had ever seen it. It was his mind's eye view of the Pharaohs, driving their slaves into hauling temple gods and goddesses, huge hunks of carved stone, from one end of the Nile to the other.

At last, as they had with bringing the stern section across, they had the bows on the ground. At the last minute, despite profanity, the ship swung sideways, balancing upon its point of greatest girth, and rolled three times out upon the plateau. There was no danger that she would be hit by any pot-shots from the crater. But it was annoying, all the same. She should have come down ready to be aligned with the stern sections; now they would have to be moved to her.

Some of the external stuff—aerials, analyzers—had been smashed off. But the hull was sound. She would fly. They

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began bringing the stern across and on this stage of the work, their familiarity with scientific engineering could, surprisingly, be used. They'd been getting used to dealing with masses in terms of levers and man power.

The welding arcs were dazzling to the eyes.

Stafford was hard at it, connecting up the control systems of the two sections and running from bow to stern and back again, ensuring that these beloved new tubes were correctly aligned. It would be comical—nothing less—if they took off and spiralled into the ground. Tait personally checked the work. He stood looking at the welded spots, where the bows had been joined to stern.

" But how do we raise her for firing ?" Todd was demanding of McGilligan heatedly when Tait got back to his familiar control room. He paused a brief moment, waiting with a painful interest for McGilligan's reply. They did not know he was there—he felt no guilt at spying.

" How, Sweeney ? I don't know." McGilligan's voice was slurred. " But the skipper'll know. Good old Loftus ! He'll know—probably go an' shove 'er up with one hand."

Tait went in briskly and sniffed at McGilligan.

" No, skipper," the Irishman said. " Haven't had a drop. Strict teetotal, me. Just tired."

" You're always teetotal between drinks, Paddy," Tait said with a smile. " Get some rest. I don't want to see your ugly mug for eight hours. Understood ? "

Tait went back outside, gathered the men under the curve of hull and addressed them. He finished: " So this is going to be backbreaking work. And it's got to be accurate. Righto, carry on."

The crew, under the professional direction of Tait, started the digging at the stern. They tried to use minute charges of explosives; but after Doc Bartlett had come running out swearing that every crock in sickbay would be smashed, they desisted. They went at it with picks and shovels and bare hands.

The hole under the stern deepened. As it did so, it was brought forward increasingly under the hull leading towards the bow. When the ship gave her first quiver, and tilted, Tait was amazed to hear a few ragged cheers. He'd thought the men were beyond that stage now. When he noticed that the ringleader appeared to be the dyspeptic Stoneman he could

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not stop smiling broadly. They were going to do it ! By all the unspeakable of space, they were !

As the cutting progressed, gouging a slit in the ground that increasingly allowed the ship room in which to lower its stern, Tait kept a growing eye of concern on the men. He saw plainly their emaciated condition. Vitamin pills are fine, if you have the bulk to give strength to the tissues; without that essential roughage, you begin living on yourself.

McGilligan was obviously cracking up—entirely from the effects of over-exertion and too little balanced nourishment. Only a few more hours, now, and they could blast off. Tait found himself almost hanging on each stroke of the shovels and personally took a shift in the sweating toil beneath the hull. The black stone and earth curved away on either side of him; measurably, as he toiled, he saw it rise above his shoulders, his head, out of sight at each downward thrust of the shovel. He drew an enormous satisfaction out of this simple labour on this alien planet. He felt that it was worth far more than all the complicated scientific gadgetry that was the normal concomittant of new-world exploration. The outworlds were finding new men this trip.

Water was brought triumphantly back by the volunteer party; after the first luxurious drinks Stafford told Tait all the water—possibly more—would be necessary for use in the jets. The volunteers went back for more.

Surprisingly early to Tait, McGilligan was up again. His face was thin and drawn; but much of the strain had gone from round his eyes and his mouth smiled. He dropped down into the slit, shivering suddenly at the drop in temperature in the shadow of the hull.

" How now, Paddy ?" demanded Tait.

" Fine. And how's yourself ?"

" I'll manage." Tait lifted his shovel. " Look, Paddy, this is all right, as far as it goes; but we'll need a junction with one of the cracks in the surface to take care of the exhaust. If we attempt to blast off with the ship in the pit we're digging—blooey."

" Yeah—I know. I'll see to it."

Tait climbed out of the pit, throwing his shovel down for the next shift. He walked with aching muscles to turn and stare back at the ship. It was inclined well over forty-five degrees now.

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He recalled the superhuman amount of work that had gone into construction of the pencil of power. The men who had died. The men lying now seriously injured. He looked about the plain—at the ringwall ahead and the ominous coppery glow in the sky above, the sweltering clouds over his head, the stony, barren, bombarded plain, the distant hint of clear sky and the invisible forest of sappy ferns in their soggy, undulating ground—he stared bitterly at it all in its alien mockery—and he seriously wondered why men bothered with space at all.

For a brief moment of self and racial doubt he stood there. And then all the things he believed in, the things only half spoken of and yet all the stronger for that, crowded in. It was by the strength of those beliefs, those shadowy intangibles of loyalty and honour and vision of man's future, that he had brought the remnants of this catastrophe this far back on the road to rehabilitation. If you ever could. If you ever could erase this tragedy entirely—its scars would disfigure more than one man's mind from now on.

Again that feeling of the impertinence of it all struck him. By rights, they should all be dead. He walked slowly across to a convenient boulder and sat down. A crewman came by with water and Tait took a long, cool swig.

" Refrigerated, huh ? "

" Yes, sir. They've got the cooler working again."

Tait wiped his mouth and felt better. Sure, they should all be dead and buried under this rock. Funny how he'd looked at the plain from the nose of *Outrider* just after they'd crashed and seen in it only hideousness and chaos and utter horror. And yet, here he was, sitting in the shade of a boulder, drinking cold water, watching his crew working on the ship.

Things worked out peculiarly. As for instance, names. Todd walked up and threw himself down in the shade.

" They've chucked me out of the radio room," he said. " Stafford's treating that ship as though it belongs to him."

" Have a drink," advised Tait. " He's got to be one hundred percent sure on those engines." He chuckled, low voiced. " He knows if he isn't he'll have me chasing his tail. I've got me a new command and I'm not losing this one."

" From what I hear, you didn't lose the first."

" Well—I'm morally certain the crash was no fault of ours. But there may be some difficulty in convincing the court martial of that."

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McGilligan shouted and waved, only his shoulders visible from the fissure. Tait stood up and, followed by Todd, walked slowly across.

"Cut through, skipper," McGilligan said. "This gap should be wide enough to let the exhaust flow through."

"Check."

"Look at the ship!" Todd exclaimed suddenly.

They swung to look and some men jumped out onto the cutting's edge.

She was still moving, settling slowly upright, almost as though shrugging her shoulders into a new garment. Men clambered off the great mound of earth and rock chips piled up on the opposite side from the cutting. They were waving their arms. The ship stood up, clean, ready—waiting to take them off this hellplanet.

Tait felt quite choked up—and then he was shouting at the crew, belting them into last minute work clearing up the site and taking everything they'd moved out back into the ship.

"Paddy. Get all the men lined up in divisions outside. I want to see the men who've done the impossible."

The bedlam subsided. The earth was shovelled away from the mouths of the venturis. The site was scoured for anything overlooked. Then, flushed of face, dishevelled, tired and incredibly vital, the crew lined up.

Tait faced them. For a long moment he stared at them, seeing each face and correlating it with some particular episode of the fantastic work they had just completed. This was one for the books. This would be yarned over in all the bars from Sirius to Altair. This was tradition in the making.

He began to speak. He made it brief.

"You've all done a good job. I know you're all hungry—so am I. But we can last on these little pills until we hit *Saumarez*." He paused, waiting for them to quieten down. In the hush the crash and the glare of the bombardment from the crater was astonishingly loud and close. Everyone gave a start, and then looked back at Tait.

"This sort of thing is often done in the Navy," he said. "They have more ships than we do. I think this is the first time the Survey Corps has taken two halves of sister ships and joined them together. In the Navy, they blend the names of the ships—it's tradition." The glare increased and he was aware of heat growing perceptibly. Stubbornly, he went on speaking.

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" So, accordingly, this must be regarded as a new command. From the wreck of *Courageous* and the wreck of *Outrider* you have fashioned a new scouter." Tait turned to face the ship and saluted. As he did so an avalanche of glowing, white hot lava spilled over the lip of the crater, began to roll evilly down the ridge. Tait swallowed.

He shouted above the inferno: " I name this ship Survey Scout *Outrageous*."

He snapped his hand down, swung towards the men. They were standing to attention.

Tait yelled : " Come on, then ! Let's get in and hoist jets ! You deep spacemen don't want your tails fried, do you ! Move ! "

The parade broke up, the men racing into the ship, whilst above them the sky went mad with the glare of the erupting volcano.

Lieutenant Commander Loftus Tait, Terran Survey Corps, looked around his control room and said simply :

" Take her up. Rendezvous on *Saumarez*." He could not resist adding: " I want some food, brother, real food ! "

Survey Scout *Outrageous* rose on her pillars of flame, flung outwards to the stars.

Kenneth Bulmer

Memo from

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Australian author Frank Bryning has rapidly developed an approach to science fiction which relies primarily on realism rather than complex possibilities of the far-distant future, such as in "On The Average" which we published last February. And especially in the story which follows.

FOR MEN MUST WORK

By Frank B. Bryning

Ferry Rocket Nine pointed her needle prow back along the orbit of Satellite Space Station Commonwealth Two. with which, for the time being, she circled Earth every ninety minutes. A silver torpedo, winged like a schoolboy's paper dart, with a high, vertical tail fin, she hung apparently motionless against the star-spotted blackness of space, three chains to starboard of Vehicle 18, Space Terminal.

Suddenly her main jet spurted flame, and she shot rapidly astern of the Station. For seconds only she blasted, but when cut-off came she was invisible in the distance and the darkness. Stern first, she still trailed after SSSC2, but she no longer had velocity enough to stay in orbit. She had entered the long spiral that would take her down into the earth's atmosphere, five hundred miles below.

Barbara Loney, aboard *FR*9, sighed with relief as Vehicle 18 disappeared from her viewport, and with it her contact with the Space Station. To her the limitless, black, star-studded void was harsh and menacing. She had been unable to see in it the wonder, the beauty, the ever-beckoning adventure, the great pioneering opportunity, her husband saw there. His

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work, as Chief Maintenance Engineer, Rockets, for all his high-sounding title, special rate of pay, spaceman's bonuses, and long earth-furloughs, had become for her a nightmare of hazardous escapades.

When Jim was on duty she would be either distracted from her own work as Librarian-Records Clerk in Vehicle 7—Residential-Recreation—or would stay cooped up in their comfortably equipped but nonetheless prison-like quarters, worrying and agonizing about his safety.

In short, as she had told herself for the hundredth time, she was not cut out to be a spaceman's wife. She could not think of any space-going quarters as a home, even though she and Jim should cohabit there. She had finally told him so—and hated herself for the hurt it gave him.

She yearned for a bright blue sky every twelve hours instead of black and star-glitter all the time. She wanted the solid earth and the green grass underfoot instead of metal and plastic decking. She wanted constant, if heavy, earth-gravity instead of the centrifugal pressure which, according to how near you were to the centre of the spinning R-R Vehicle, varied from one gravity to absolute weightlessness. She wanted fresh, earth-scented, if germ-laden, sun-and-rain-cleared air instead of the aseptic, machine-washed and precipitron-cleared oxygen-helium mixture. She longed for a small cottage with windows to open and shut, a garden, and—of all things—a picket fence. She wanted a *real* home.

So she had persuaded Jim to apply for the position of Superintendent, Rocket Maintenance, Woomera—a job for which he was well qualified although little inclined.

"Time enough when I've served my full stint out here and we've piled up more money in the bank," he had protested. "And I'll be better able to handle such a job when I've had more experience with operating conditions in space."

"For men must work, and women must weep," she had quoted rather bitterly in reply. "More important that you survive your stint in space. And the surest way to do that is not to stay too long! And it's time we had a home we can call a home!"

In the end she had had her way, and Jim was even now one hour ahead of her, in *FR5*, First Division of the Station-Woomera-Station Ferry for the day. By the time she landed he would, no doubt, be leaving their hotel room for his

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personal interview with the Appointments Board. Perversely, tears welled into her eyes in the midst of her hopes and rosy dreams, for she felt remorseful still at having forced Jim's hand. If only she could be strong, and confident, as a spaceman's wife should be! If only she were not the worrying kind . . .

"I think it was very mean of them to separate us from our husbands," complained newly-wed Jean Urquhart, placing a hand on Barbara's arm.

"A tribute to our petite figures, my dear," she replied comfortingly, "and to the solid worth of our husbands. They always pass a few pounds of mass from one Division to another at the last minute to even up the loads, and the easiest way is to exchange a few lightweight passengers for some heavyweights."

"But since we're all weightless, out here, I don't see that it matters."

"We'll weigh plenty when the atmosphere drag is braking the ship," said Barbara. "That's when it counts—during deceleration and landing."

"Well, they might have picked some of the unmarried ones."

"They did with Beryl Sanders, over there—she's not married. But of course they do it by arithmetic and not by sentiment. At such times, dear, you and I and our hefty husbands are only entries in the 'Mass' column on the passenger list."

Jean grasped Barbara's arm again as a gentle vibration began to make itself felt throughout the Ferry. "What's that?" she gasped.

"Just the steering jets—swinging the nose of the ship around to point the way we are going. It wouldn't do to enter the atmosphere tail first."

It was about fifty minutes after leaving the Station and *FR9* had gone nearly half way around the Earth when Barbara detected a slight tendency to slide forward against her seat belt.

"Better tighten your seat belt, Jean, and put on your chest belt," she said, tapping her companion's arm. "We're entering the atmosphere now. The ship is beginning to feel the drag."

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Jean gave Barbara an almost worshipful look a minute later when the notice screen lit up with the message, "*Please fix chest belts*," and the co-pilot came into the passenger cabin to check on every belt.

Soon the murmur of the rushing air outside pervaded the ship, minute by minute increasing in volume as they planed into the denser strata. The pressure of the belts grew greater, holding them back.

Wide-eyed, and gripping the arms of her seat, Jean strove to remain calm as the wind grew stronger, its rushing sound mounting to a roar as the ship tensed, with minor creakings and crepitations, all about her. Her tendency to slide forward off her seat drove her ever harder against the belts, and convinced her that she was no longer weightless.

It was her first trip down from the Station, planing, unpowered, through the atmosphere, and more trying than the short, fully powered rocket trip up, with all its muscle-wrenching acceleration. Later, when the roar became a howl, she watched with wary fascination the leading edge of the starboard wing grow cherry-red, and the colour slowly spread over all that part of the wing visible through the port.

Through darkness and daylight and darkness again they went in something more than two hours between leaving SSSC2 and gliding in over Western Australia to touch down at Woomera in mid-morning.

"I don't see Harry," complained Jean Urquhart a moment later, as they came out through the still warm hull into the desert air which Barbara sniffed with pleasure. Barbara had not expected to see Jim, who would be even now on his way to his interview.

Labouring a little in the full earth gravity they reached the public lounge of the spaceport, where Jean's questing for her husband was cut short by the public address system:

"Paging Mrs. James Loney and Mrs. Henry Urquhart! Mrs. James Loney and Mrs. Henry Urquhart—please come to the Traffic Manager's office. Paging Mrs. . . ."

They were shown in at once, to be received by the young-middle-aged Traffic Manager as if he were handling eggshell china. Both girls began to feel alarmed as he moved the chairs under them with great solicitude. Behind his desk he remained

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standing. He buttoned his coat nervously, and placed his hands on the back of his swivel chair.

" I am afraid," he began, " I must give you ladies some rather disturbing news. The fact is—well, I have to inform you that *Ferry Rocket Five*, which left the Station before your rocket, has not yet landed."

" Harry !" cried Jean. " My husband—"

Too late ! came the bitter thought to Barbara as a sick feeling hit her like a blow in the stomach. *Too late* ! *It has happened before we could get away* !

Suddenly she realised that Jean was in her arms, sobbing, and kneeling on the floor. She, herself, had been sitting tense and unheeding for a long minute. The Traffic Manager was saying something unheard by Jean or herself. He was looking embarrassed. Barbara made an effort.

" I'm sorry," she said, through set teeth. " I—*we* didn't hear what you—"

" I didn't mean to frighten you," he said. " Please don't assume the worst. *FR5* is disabled, but no one is injured—yet. She has been hit by a meteorite and is out of control in a new orbit between the orbit of the Station and the fringe of the atmosphere. Help is on the way from the Station. We hope it may be in time."

Ferry Rocket Five was tumbling raggedly through space with half her starboard wing and part of her tail fin torn away. She had a corkscrewing motion, the result of a tail-over-nose rotation about her short axis, but she was also spinning slowly around her long axis.

Fortunately the impact of the meteorite, which had been from behind and below on the starboard side, had accelerated her again, cancelling out much of the deceleration by which she had begun her jouney down to Earth. Fortunate it was, for now there would be more time before she would enter the atmosphere—and in that time she might be saved.

Imperatively, if she were to be saved, it would have to be in that time. If, with her airfoils torn and distorted, and her outer skin breached as it was, she were to enter the atmosphere, she would go more wildly out of control. She would be tossed about with tremendous violence, and almost inevitably be torn apart.

If, by some miracle, she should hold together long enough to reach the denser air strata at a velocity between four and

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five miles a second, the hull would be heated to a dull red, and both her disrupted thermal insulation, and her refrigeration system, if still functioning, would be unable to keep the heat at bay.

These hazards had been promptly recognised by everyone as soon as *FR5*'s Captain had reported his predicament by jury-rigged radio. Help could come, in the time, only from SSSC2, and all the Station's personnel who could help in the rescue were going all-out to do so. Particularly were they busy aboard Vehicles 16 and 17, Maintenance.

A warning buzz from the wall near his desk informed the Traffic Manager to cut in the speaker.

Satellite Space Station Commonwealth Two was reporting that *FR5* had been located by radar and two space tugs were on their way to assist her. *Moon Rocket* 8 had just arrived at Vehicle 18, Space Terminal, from the Moon, and was being re-fueled and cleared of cargo to follow the tugs and take off passengers from *FR5*, if possible.

On *FR5* a man had gone outside in a space suit to weld an air leak—a precarious feat with the ship tumbling and writhing as she was.

At this last item of news Barbara's hands clenched and her lips drew into a tight line. She knew who that hero would be ! James Loney, Chief Maintenance Engineer, Rockets, and trouble-shooter extraordinary !

When the radio confirmed her guess a few seconds later she accepted the near-homage of Jean as graciously as her mixed fear, pride, and desperate hope permitted. But down inside her she felt stark terror such as she had never felt when " out there " on the Station on similar occasions when she had known Jim was running special risks.

It felt very different here, on the ground—remote and excluded from any sense of contact with Jim. She was, in fact, no longer " with " him, either in space or, it seemed, in spirit. She found herself, in her turn, clutching Jean.

At that same instant James Loney was clinging like a limpet to the plunging hull of *FR5* as he finished off sealing the air leak. Down on magnetic knee-pads he held himself rigid by straining up against the two short lines fastened to the belt of his space suit and hooked into recessed hand-holds in the hull.

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He kept his eyes on the skin of the ship, for space-hardened though he was, he could not look for long without getting dizzy at the wildly spiraling stars and the huge, greenish balloon of Earth, filling half the sky and looming unpredictably past from any direction.

Beneath him at one moment, the hull drove upwards, carrying him before it as it swung over like the sail of a windmill, and he had to brace himself against it or sprawl on his face. A few seconds later, as the sideways spin slowly turned the ship on its long axis, he was carried around behind the "windmill" movement and dragged after it, so that only the lines held him against the hull. Between thrust and drag and thrust again he had to hold the pressure on knees, toes, and the lashings to resist slipping sideways.

He was clawing his way back to the airlock, to stow the welding kit, when the searchlights of the two tugs flooded the hull of *FR5* with light. By space-suit radio he made contact with them. The three men aboard each tug were of his own crew and all were ready in space suits. By tacit consent he took charge.

"Here's the situation," he told them. "We can't take passengers out until we stop this ship flinging about. If we do that in time we won't need to trans-ship passengers at all. You tugs can take her back to the Station.

"First, though, we must get about four bottles of oxygen into this airlock to keep them supplied inside. She's lost too much air, and there might be a few smaller leaks than the one I've just sealed. Stacy and Adams—you break out that oxygen and bring it over. Acknowledge please."

"Stacy acknowledging—four bottles of oxygen—coming." Adams in turn, repeated the words.

"Don't try to come aboard yet," said Loney. "Jet over and wait alongside at the pole of the short axis around which we're rotating. I'll meet you there."

Stacy and Adams acknowledged together.

"Get started . . . Hobday?" Jim asked.

"Hobday acknowledging."

"You break out one Mark Four reaction motor, with full fuel tank, and bring it to me at the short axis of rotation. Right?"

Hobday repeated his instructions.

"Go ahead . . . Miles?" Jim asked.

"Yes, Jim. Miles speaking."

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" You break out a full reserve fuel tank for Hobday's Mark Four," said Jim. " Also break out two Mark One reactors, fully fueled. Stand by to bring them when asked for."

As Miles repeated his instructions Loney took two coiled lines from the airlock. Clipping one to his belt he fastened the other just outside the airlock hatch, and, trailing it after him, worked his way from hand-hold to hand-hold thirty feet or so along the hull to the short axis about which the nose and tail of the hundred-and-twenty foot ship were rotating.

There he clung for a few moments, clipping his short belt lines on and adjusting himself to the motion, which here was much less violent than up near the nose where he had been welding.

Facing forward he got carefully to his feet, placing his magnetic oversoles firmly on the steel hull and keeping his belt lines—one in front and one behind—taut. Thus braced and guyed he stood like a stubby mast on the back of the *Ferry Rocket.*

As it somersaulted he went with it, and because it also spun slowly on its long axis, his upright figure followed a skewed and complex spiral which was compounded of two circular motions at right angles to one another; and the orbital path of the ship.

By the time Stacy and Adams had come alongside, and adjusted their relative motions so as to hang stationary in relation to the short axis, they found that Loney's head would swing diagonally past them at about fifteen-second intervals. First from one side, then from the other, he would come at them and swing away, passing sometimes within arm's length and sometimes up to twenty feet away.

" Stacy," said Loney as he swung past, " give your oxygen to Adams, and prepare to come aboard. Next time round I'll throw you a line."

Stacy was ready as soon as Loney's head came into view again. At the same moment the line came at him like a white whiplash in the light from the tugs.

" Take a turn around your wrist and hold on," said Jim Loney, taking in the slack as he came close.

When he began to recede he pulled gently, letting the line run a little through his heavily gloved hands to ease the initial strain.

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Stacy came aboard like a game fish, striking the hull about ninety degrees around its circumference from Loney.

"Guy yourself with a line front and back, like mine," instructed Loney. "Cast off my line as soon as you're fast."

Four circuits later Loney threw the line to Adams, who quickly clipped it into the hand-hold of one oxygen bottle. Loney led this like a kite until it floated gently alongside Stacy, who unhooked it.

Seeing Hobday approaching with the heavy reaction motor, Loney announced a change of procedure.

"Stand by, Adams, while we get that reactor aboard. Stacy—you get that bottle of oxygen inside the ship. They'll be able to wait for the others if you give them that. We'll get the rest aboard easier when we stop this spin. Leave your guy lines there."

Stacy unhooked his lines and struggled with the oxygen bottle along the line Loney had laid down to the airlock.

At Loney's direction Hobday relinquished the reaction motor to Adams, and was brought aboard to take Stacy's place. Loney threw the line again to Adams, who hooked it on to the massive reaction motor. This was a much more sluggish item than either a man or an oxygen bottle, and Loney kept a short line on it until he had it moving.

The strain on his arms and body and belt lines almost tore him off the ship, but he had to prevent the motor swinging about and perhaps injuring Hobday. When he had it following nicely he eased off the line and let it come within Hobday's reach.

"Hold it down until it matches motion with the ship," he instructed. When this was done Loney drew the motor to him, and manoeuvred it around him until its jet pointed at right angles to the long axis of the ship—that is, into the direction of the ship's spin. Then he switched on the powerful electro-magnetic grips and it snapped tight against the hull.

"Grapples too?" enquired Hobday, crawling up alongside.

"Four," agreed Loney. Then he called to Adams.

"Adams acknowledging."

"Stand clear of blast!" said Jim.

Hobday ran two pairs of grappling claws on chains out to the nearest hand-holds in front of the reaction motor and hauled them tight while Loney checked and adjusted his controls.

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"All secure!" reported Hobday.
"Is Stacy inside the airlock?"
"Yes. Airlock closed."
"Adams standing clear?"
"Well clear."
"Stand by for blast!"

Just as they rolled out of the glare of the searchlights Loney pressed the firing trigger and a brilliant white flame shot twenty feet into the blackness of space. Beneath them the ship vibrated. But, through the emptiness around them no sound came from the flame which in an atmosphere would have roared like any rocket. There came instead a humming and a vibration through the substance of the motor, the hull, and their own flesh and bone.

Gradually Loney opened up the throttle, his eyes on the gauge. He held the needle steady, and then gave some attention to the alternation of light and darkness as the spin took them in and out of the searchlights.

"She's slowing down," called Hobday. "Circuit about nineteen seconds now."

"We'll have a bigger fight with the tumbling," said Loney. "I'll take this reactor up to the tail. You get Miles aboard with the other charge of fuel and both Mark One reactors. Leave Stacy and Adams to get that oxygen inboard."

"Okay. I'll call Miles now."

"Getting slower," remarked Loney a short time later. "How long's the circuit?"

Hobday timed it. "Twenty-seven seconds."

Shortly after that Loney began to taper off the blast, until, slowly, with the dying out of the flame, the spinning of the ship had stopped altogether. Her motion was now the less complex but still powerful tumbling.

Hobday released the grapples and wound them in.

"You had better stand out at the end of the short axis," said Loney. "You'll turn about like a top but you'll stay in one position, and you'll get your men aboard easily."

"Don't you need a hand first?"

"No thanks. Now that she's not spinning I can stay in front of the swing all the time. The thrust will hold me on—and the reactor too. I'll slide it along . . ."

* * *

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"Oh!" exclaimed Barbara, jumping to her feet as the Traffic Manager cut off his radio speaker. "I had forgotten!"

"What's the matter?" pleaded Jean, alarm in her eyes.

"Jim's interview! He had an interview with the Appointments Board—" Barbara looked at her watch, "it was for eleven thirty—seven minutes from now." She turned to the Traffic Manager. "Could I—I mean, I think I should inform the Board—ask them to—to postpone—"

The Traffic Manager took up his telephone. "I'll contact the Secretary of the Board now," he said. "You can speak from here."

"Thank you," said Barbara, inwardly amazed that she was able to concern herself with an immediate practical matter while Jim was out there fighting for his life. Yet she felt that it was all the more important now—for both their sakes, if he survived—that he should not lose his chance of getting that ground job.

"I would like to make my request in person, to the Board, if I may," she added.

Meanwhile, between the base of the tail fin and the damaged driving jet, Loney anchored his reaction motor with the magnetic clamps and the grapples. He swung the nozzle to point straight "upwards"—at right angles to the long axis of the ship and into the direction she was tumbling. Then he went to meet Hobday and Miles half-way from amidships. He took from them his refill tank of fuel.

"Hobday, take your Mark One out on the starboard wing, just two feet from the edge and aft as close as you can get to where the wing is twisted. Clamp on and aim at ninety degrees. Miles, you do the same on the port wing, matching Hobday's position exactly. Lie down, both of you, with your feet towards the hull, and lash on."

By the time Loney had returned to his reactor and lashed down his reserve fuel tank, Hobday and Miles reported ready.

"Stand by to compensate in case she starts spinning again," Loney instructed. "Set jets at half throttle and be ready to fire when I tell you."

Loney sat behind his reactor, one leg on either side wedged beneath a grapple chain. He took hold of the hand grips and sighted on the stars, which streamed up over the torn tail-fin like tracer bullets. He found the firing trigger with his forefinger.

"Stand by for blast!"

* * * *

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The Chairman of the Appointments Board and his two fellow Members stood behind their table as Barbara Loney entered the room. After introductions the Chairman led her to a chair.

" Mrs. Loney," he said, his expression solicitious. " Permit us to offer our best hopes that your husband is even now winning his splendid battle to save *Ferry Rocket Five*. We feel that in these circumstances we could not refuse to see you, or to tell you personally that your request for postponement of his interview would certainly be granted, *if he should wish it*."

" ' If he should—,' " echoed Barbara. " I can assure you, Mr. Chairman, there is no doubt—"

" There, there ! Don't let us rush things," said the Chairman, in a fatherly manner. " I am sure we understand exactly how you feel at a time like this." He had walked around the table to his own chair, and the three men took their seats. " This is not a formal meeting of the Board. Speak as freely as you like. We are glad of the opportunity to meet you."

" Thank you, Mr. Chairman—and Gentlemen," replied Barbara. " I—I feel, at this moment, that all I can really be concerned with is my husband's safety. It's all I *should* be concerned with. But since he cannot keep his appointment with you—"

" We understand, Mrs. Loney. Your husband is a fortunate man to have a wife so resourceful. And in the circumstances, while he is fighting for the lives of himself and others, we could hardly fail to stretch a point, if necessary, on his behalf. However, the next Bulletin from Station Two is almost due. Please stay while we hear it."

At that moment the star stream began to slant from port to starboard, and the greenish curve of Earth bulged in. Loney cut off his jet.

" Hobday—short blast ! Three seconds."

Flame spurted up from the starboard wing, and slowly *FR5* responded to the pressure. Loney watched the shooting stars swing back towards the vertical, and Earth floated away like a balloon.

" Two seconds more," he demanded. " Miles—stand by to compensate ! "

As soon as the ship was trimmed she vibrated again under the heavy blast of Loney's reactor. After some seconds it

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seemed—from their tendency to float away from the ship "beneath" them, and the slowing of the star movements—that the rotation was being retarded. Again the stars swung off to starboard, and a sector of the earth came into view.

"Hobday—blast seven seconds! Miles—stand by!"

There was a brief static hum.

Loney fired again, opening up to the fullest. This time he did not cut off before his fuel petered out. Now their lashings had definitely been needed to hold them back with the ship as its lessening thrust beneath them made it clear she was slowing down. And the stars could now be seen as discreet dots, swinging this time from starboard to port.

"Miles—blast five seconds!"

Loney released his empty fuel tank and laid hold of the reserve.

"It appears, Gentlemen, that Chief Maintenance Engineer Loney has virtually succeeded in saving *Ferry Rocket Five*," said the Chairman of the Appointments Board. "In which case do you think it premature to inform Mrs. Loney, unofficially, of course, of what we have in mind?"

"Quite the appropriate time, I should think," said the Member on Barbara's left.

The other nodded. "I agree. Since meeting Mrs. Loney I am more than reassured that we are making the right decision. She is undoubtedly the right kind of wife for a space-going officer."

"The fact is, Mrs. Loney," said the Chairman, "we had already decided not to appoint your husband Superintendent of Rocket Maintenance, Woomera, although he is well qualified. He is much too good a man in space to waste his talents in a ground job at his age."

"But Mr. Cha—"

"Now don't underrate what I have to tell you," pleaded the Chairman, hastily. "We have a much better post for him. He will outrank that ground job considerably—and we know it is something he will like much better. We have known his worth and his predilections for a long time, and his present valiant performance has confirmed to the hilt our estimate of him. We are going to appoint him Officer in Charge Maintenance, Satellite Space Station Commonwealth Two!"

He beamed and the rest of the Board smiled indulgently at Barbara's astonishment.

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" But—but—Mr. Chairman ! The whole idea—I don't know how—"

" Don't try, my dear," deprecated the Chairman. " No thanks are due to us. Your husband has more than earned his promotion, although it is several grades upwards in one move, both in rank and pay. We anticipate that he will not only do the job superlatively well, but that because of his age he will be able to give it the continuity of tenure which has been lacking in the past."

" Continuity of tenure," echoed Barbara, aghast.

" Yes. Until now, as you may know, our appointees to that position have all been men within three, or at most, four years of the age of retirement from active duty in space. Your husband should have a good ten years ahead of him."

" Ten years !" gasped Barbara. " In space for *ten more years*."

" By then, with yearly increments, you would be very nicely placed financially."

" I wasn't thinking of that, Mr. Chairman," said Barbara, faintly. " My husband's application for the position of Superintendent of Maintenance, Woomera, would not have been made at all if—"

" If he had had any idea that he was in the running for this position," the Chairman cut in. " You need not tell us. We know from his records and other sources that his main enthusiasm is for taking part in what is done out in space. If anyone knows that better than we do, that person will be you. Am I not right ?"

Barbara looked at the three men in turn. She saw no way out. She realised she could not win her battle here and now.

" Perfectly right," she acknowledged. " That is what he desires, above all."

" Would you like to be the bearer of the good news ? The appointment is yet two months off—due at the end of the furlough you are just beginning. You and your husband can keep it to yourselves ?"

He paused at sight of Barbara sitting rigid, eyes closed. When she opened her eyes he saw that they were glittering with unshed tears.

" We can keep the secret, Mr. Chairman," she promised. " May I say on my husband's behalf how delighted he—"

" Here is another Bulletin," said the Member on Barbara's right, and turned up the volume.

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" *Ferry Rocket Five* has been stabilized by the efforts of Chief Maintenance Engineer Loney and his crew," announced the radio, from SSSC2. " All aboard are now safe and unharmed. Two space tugs are lashed to the Ferry and are accelerating back into the orbit of the Station. Passengers will be disembarked at the Station to await another Ferry.

" This fortunate outcome has been mainly due to the heroism and skill of Chief Maintenance Engineer James Loney, who, not a moment too soon, handed over *FR5* to his space tugs just as the first noticeable contact was made with the atmosphere. As a result of damage to the Ferry's airfoils it began to yaw and plunge before the tugs had warped in properly and made fast. Quick work by Loney with the lines again saved the situation, but he suffered injury when his left leg and arm were momentarily jammed between a tug and the tail fin of *FR5*. He was quickly rescued and taken inboard a tug. It is reported that both the leg and arm have been broken . . ."

White-faced, her eyes closed, Barbara sat gripping the table.

> " *But men must work, and women must weep,*
> *Though storms be sudden, and waters deep,*
> *And the harbour bar be moaning.*"

The lines drove into her mind again—to mock, and yet to steady her, with the reminder that she was one with all womankind. The poet Kingsley had not had space-going vessels in mind, and there was no harbour bar, this time—unless it were that fringe of atmosphere in which *FR5* had almost foundered. Yet the age-old axiom he had voiced held true on the new frontiers. And she and Jim were caught up in the ancient dilemma . . .

" Vehicle Eleven, Medical, at the Station, is alerted and ready to receive Chief Maintenance Engineer Loney for immediate attention," continued the radio.

" Mr. Chairman !" Barbara had sprung to her feet. " Can you secure me a berth on this afternoon's Ferry back to the Station ?"

" First Priority," agreed the Chairman, picking up his telephone. " No doubt, too, you will want to send a radio ?"

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For some moments Barbara—a resigned and defeated though not altogether unhappy Barbara—pondered with pencil in hand over the radiogram form.

MY HERO, she printed, with a wry twist to her mouth. AM RETURNING TODAY'S ROCKET. SEE YOU 1740 HOURS. LOVE. BARBARA.

Yet she signed with a frown, and remained clicking the pencil against her teeth. Somehow it did not quite convey all she wanted to say to him. Then the pencil came back to the paper. She heaved a big sigh.

After RETURNING she inserted the word HOME and passed the message to the waiting operator.

Frank B. Bryning

THE LITERARY LINE-UP

One of the most powerful serials we ever published was Wilson Tucker's *Wild Talent* during 1954 (subsequently it went into book form, then a Book Club edition, and now a film is being made from it in Hollywood). Since then we have not had many telepath stories in the longer lengths, certainly none that could compare to Tucker's great story. With minor reservations, however, we feel that we can at least say that Dan Morgan's new serial "The Uninhibited" which starts next month is at least well above the average.

It deals with telepathy, too, but from a completely different angle to that which Tucker used. True, some Earth people are natural telepaths, but for reasons which become obvious in the story as it unfolds, they are 'inhibited' at birth—by outside alien influence. When a surgeon performs a delicate brain operation on one of the 'inhibited' and produces a fully-fledged telepath the drama developes rapidly.

Story ratings for No. 58 were :

1.	Green Destiny (Conclusion) -	Kenneth Bulmer
2.	To Kill Or Cure - - -	James White
3.	Out Of Order - - - -	John Brunner
	Oh, Ishrael ! - - - - -	Brian W. Aldiss
4.	The Humanitarian - - -	Dan Morgan
5.	Point Of Contact - - -	John Kippax

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Rehabilitation for a person suffering from amnesia is a difficult task at the best of times, but somewhere during the course of therapy the patient begins to help himself. However deep the protective block in the subconscious some memories are retained and certain things appear familiar. But take the case of a man to whom nothing is familiar—where the psychological block is utterly complete . . . .

FRESH START

By Arthur Sellings

The first thing he saw when he opened his eyes was a white oval of a face hovering over him. Two yellow eyes were watching him. Red lips parted in a warm smile.

"Are you all right?" The voice was quiet, concerned.

"Yes," he said weakly. "Yes, I think so. Where—" He struggled to rise. But the hand laid upon his shoulder was surprisingly strong. Or was it only that he was surprisingly weak?

"Don't exert yourself," the woman said. Her hand moved beneath where he was lying, and he felt himself being raised gently to a sitting position.

He looked about him. He was in an impossibly tiny room. A shaded bulb shone in the low ceiling. No light came from outside. A small curtain on one white wall was the only sign of a window.

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" Where am I ?" he asked, and as he spoke became aware of the vibration, the slight sway. " Oh—an ambulance ?"

The woman nodded.

" But what happened ? How did I get here ?"

" You were in a car smash. But don't worry. You're all right now."

" Car smash ?" He stared at her. " But I don't remember any smash."

" You were unconscious for a long time. You lost your memory."

" I did ? But I still can't remember." Panic fluttered in his voice. " I don't even know who I am."

" I'm sure you do." The woman's voice was smilingly persuasive. " *Try*."

He tried—and something seemed to click suddenly in his brain. " I do know," he said wonderingly. " I'm Sam Bishop, aren't I ? "

" That's right. You see."

" But who are you ? That isn't a nurse's uniform."

" No, it's not a nurse's uniform."

" Then—" He closed his eyes, seeking a name to link with the image of her face. A name fluttered down like a leaf from the branches of his mind.

" You're . . . Lena ? "

She clapped her hands delightedly. " There you are, you *do* remember. What else about me ?"

He frowned, then his eyes widened. " Aren't you my wife?"

She took his hands in hers. " Sam, darling," she whispered.

He trembled and drew his hands away.

" Why, what's the matter, Sam ? "

" It's all so queer," he said haltingly. " I remember that my name's Sam Bishop. I remember that you're Lena, that you're my wife. But they seem just like names in my head. Just facts like—well, like—" His words trailed off. " I don't seem to know any other facts," he finished hopelessly.

" Yes you do," she said quickly. " But you've been in a coma so long. That's why everything appears so strange to you. But be patient. As you get stronger so will your memory."

" *No*," he protested, feeling suddenly trapped in this white box of unreality. He struggled against the blankets that swathed him. " I can't wait that long. Let me out."

" What is it, Sam ?" Her voice was anxious, her hand cool upon his brow.

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"I . . . I don't know," he moaned. "Let me see the world outside. Let me be sure it's there."

"Certainly," she smiled, and stretched a hand to the curtain. She took a look out before she drew it back. "There."

Trees flashed by, green and lush against a blue sky.

"Thank you," he said, sinking back. "I just had to have something to get hold of, something real."

"Of course, Sam. I understand."

"Trees, blue skies," he said, sighing. "It seems such a long time since I saw them."

"It *is* a long time."

"*How* long?"

"Days, weeks—don't think about it. We'll have all the time in the world now."

"But where are you taking me?" he said, stirring.

"Home."

"Home?" he echoed. Again, as he asked himself a question, the answer came fluttering to hand. Was this the experience of everyone suffering a lost memory—this piecemeal process? So that you couldn't remember a thing until you asked the specific question, then down it came?

"Yes, home, Sam."

"Fifteen Cambridge Road," he said.

"Good—you didn't ask that time. You knew."

But he wasn't listening. Ask myself another fact, he thought. *Where did I crash*? No answer this time, though. He tried again, fearfully. He cried aloud. "Where did I crash? What happened? Why can't I remember?"

"Because of the shock. Don't try to remember."

"But how bad was I?"

"Very bad. Multiple fractures—skull, ribs, pelvis. And dozens of stitches." She drew back his shirt. A delicate tracery ran under his right breast, diagonally across his stomach. He looked at it as impersonally as if it were a map.

"M-mm, neat needlework," he commented. "Ah well, as long as I'm still in one piece—"

She bit her lip.

He saw it. "Why, what's the matter? I am, aren't I?" And then he realised. He thought it had been the tightness of the blankets about him—that and his weak condition. But it wasn't. He reached out a trembling hand.

"You'll have to be brave, Sam."

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His hand reached what it was feeling for. Beneath his thighs the swathing blankets were empty. His hand froze—then suddenly he laughed.

She looked at him, alarmed.

"Funny, isn't it?" he said. "For a second then I was scared that I was paralyzed. There's no difference, but somehow being rid of them doesn't seem half as bad."

She laid a hand on his. "You're brave," she said.

"Am I?" He didn't withdraw his hand this time, but squeezed hers gently. "No I'm not, I—"

He had not noticed that the vibration had stopped. Now there was a click, and sunlight flooded in as the doors were opened. A tubby, kindly-faced man in uniform climbed in.

"Well, this is it, Mr. Bishop. The end of the line." Bishop realised now that he was in a kind of wheelchair. He was wheeled to the ground down a ramp.

"All O.K., Mrs. Bishop?" the ambulance man said, handing over the chair to her charge. He touched his cap to the man in it. "Best of luck, Mr. Bishop."

"Thank you," he murmured.

The ambulance drove away, leaving Bishop staring at his surroundings, the row of neat houses, the tidy lawns.

"We're home, Sam," said his wife, her eyes shining. It still seemed strange to him to think of her as his wife, to hear somebody call her Mrs. Bishop. It was like a dream. No, it was the reverse of a dream. In a dream you found yourself in surroundings that you told yourself you ought to know but which you couldn't quite place. But this street, this white-painted house up whose paved path he was being wheeled—he *knew* these. Yet he couldn't remember ever having been here before. Not actually walking up this path—or entering this door at which they were now halted.

"*No*," he said, twisting back in the chair. "I'm frightened."

She bent over him. He felt cool lips kiss his brow, caught a delicate hint of perfume. "You've no need to be frightened, darling. I'm here."

"But . . . I don't know what's in there."

She had the key in the lock now. She turned. "You'll remember. You can prove it. What colour's the hall done in?"

He closed his eyes to think. He opened them. "Blue and white?"

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" Right first time," she said happily, throwing the door wide. As he was wheeled in on soundless tyres, he said on a sudden impulse, " But what colour was it before ?"

She stopped short for a moment. Then she laughed. " Why, it's always been blue and white." She turned away and stooped. " Look at all the welcome home cards."

But he was wondering why he had thought for a moment of a home different from this. Of a hall painted not blue and white, but . . . but—

The fragment of memory withered and died. But why, in that moment, had it seemed more real than any of these other facts that he had pulled down from the dark recesses of his mind ?

He looked up, to meet the gaze of a pair of golden eyes, looking at him compassionately, patiently—and he felt suddenly ashamed. He ought to be grateful, yet here he was, fighting the truth—that he was home. Was it any wonder if, after what he had been through, his mind played him tricks, making him confuse reality and illusion ? But *this* was real.

" Lena," he said softly. " Bear with me."

Her lips trembled. " Of course, Sam."

" I'm—I'm glad to be home. Really I am."

And then he was holding out his arms, and she was cradled in them, her face buried in his chest, sobbing, sobbing.

Through the rest of that day Sam Bishop learned more about himself. As, question by question, he filled in the blanks in his past, he began to feel like a living dossier—a dossier, its subject and its compiler rolled into one—

Q: How old am I ? *A*: Thirty-four. *Q*: Where was I born ? *A*: Right here in this town. *Q*: Here ? *A*: Greenville. *Q*: Have I any relations here ? *A*: No, you were an only child. Both your parents are dead. *Q*: How long have I been married ? *A*: Six and a half years. *Q*: How old is Lena ? *A*: Twenty-seven. *Q*: How did I meet her ? *A*: She was the girl next door. *Q*: What was my job ? *A*: Office manager, Greenville Novelty Co.

And so on and so on, while Lena stood quietly by, evidently realizing what was going on in his mind, getting tea then supper, keeping him supplied with an occasional drink.

When she wheeled him to bed he said, " Well, it's a good thing we were living in a bungalow anyway." Then, impa-

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tiently, " Couldn't they have supplied a runabout? So that you wouldn't have to push me everywhere like this?"

" I don't mind," she said.

" But I do."

" Of course, dear," she said soothingly as she helped him into bed. " Your new legs will be here soon. They're being custom-built, you know."

Sleep was a long time coming. He tossed and turned as his restless mind kept up the dossier-filling process. *Who*? *What*? *When*?

Q: Why has nobody been down from the office?

But that wasn't a question that memory could answer. " Why has nobody been down from the office to see me?" he asked Lena.

" They wanted to," she answered sleepily. " But I thought it best to wait awhile, till you were settled in."

" I'm all right," he said, stirring. " How about wheeling me out to the works in the morning? That is, if it's not too—" How far was it? Less than a mile. " How about it?"

" Why, certainly, Sam."

" Thank you," he said, feeling contented now. Just as when he had felt trapped in the ambulance, it eased his anxiety to be able to see things for himself, and not have to rely entirely upon this absurd memory.

He smiled into the darkness. " At least there's one thing I don't have to remember. I'm finding it out all over again."

" What's that, Sam?"

" Why I married you. Goodnight, Lena."

A happy sigh came from the other bed. " Thank you, Sam dear. Goodnight."

The sun next morning shone from a blue sky. People waved to them as they passed. Who is everybody? he asked himself. That one was—Mrs. Matthews. This one? Betty Burke. This kid in a jazz-striped shirt who biked past and called out, " Hiya, Sam!"—that was Jimmy Young from down the street.

Who else do I know? he thought, but no answer came. Their names, like every other item of knowledge, seemed to have to wait for the triggering of a specific question. Not who or what do I know—but who or what is *this*? When would the process end? he wondered. Would it ever end? Only when, fact upon single fact, it had all been recovered?

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But the first grimness of that thought faded. He found himself almost enjoying the process of re-discovery as they came into the centre of the town. One by one the buildings fell into place. There was the Town Hall, the Greenville Bank, the barber-shop, Schmidt's the delicatessen, the drug store.

It was only a small town. They were soon across it and out among grass and trees. The works came into view, a single white concrete building.

Almost before they were inside a burly man came rushing to greet them. "How are you, Sam?" he asked, beaming.

Sam's memory, prompted, told him that this was Mr. Finney, his boss. "Fine, thanks, Mr. Finney. I hope you don't mind my—"

Finney waved amply. "Mind, Sam? I'm glad to see you. We're all glad to see you. Come on in."

He took over the wheelchair himself and wheeled Sam into the main office proudly.

A small crowd of people gathered round, slapping Sam gently on the back, hurling congratulations at him.

"Hey, give the man air!" Finney boomed.

Faced with piecing together a dozen faces and names all at once, Sam was glad of the respite. He smiled wanly. "Just thought I'd come down and see how you're getting on without me." He didn't have the faintest idea what exactly they were supposed to be getting on with—he hadn't got around to that—but it seemed the right sort of thing to say.

That started a chorus of jokes and lamentations, before Finney waved them all away good-humouredly and wheeled Sam into his own office.

"Well, how has it been, Sam? Tough?"

"Well, I didn't know much about it." Was *that* an understatement!

Finney nodded sympathetically. "And you don't want to, eh?"

"That's right. I'm only interested in looking forward now. I can't wait to get back to work."

"Back, Sam?" Finney looked shocked. "What are you thinking of?"

"Why not?" Sam said cheerfully. "The wounds are healed—and I get my new legs soon. It'll probably take me a couple of weeks to get used to them, but then—"

"But, Sam, you don't have to worry any more. You're independent now, with the compensation from the crash."

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"I am? How do you—" He broke off, as he intercepted a quick glance between Finney and Lena. Lena said quickly, "I told Mr. Finney, Sam, when he asked me if there was anything he could do. He's been very kind."

"I'm grateful," Sam muttered. He looked at Finney squarely. "But I don't want to live the rest of my life on a pension. When can I start back?"

Finney toyed with a beefy lower lip and looked awkward. "We-ell, Sam, it's not quite so easy as that. You see, young King took over your job, and he got married on the strength of it. After all—well, nobody thought you'd want to come back."

"Nobody seems to have wanted me to," Sam retorted angrily.

"Oh, don't get me wrong, Sam. But—" he spread his hands—"in the circumstances—"

Sam couldn't trust himself to say anything more. It was plainly no use arguing, anyway. He gestured to Lena to wheel him out.

He brooded, not speaking, all the way back. He was beginning to feel trapped again. As they came into the main street he found himself beginning to dislike the place. Was that how he had felt before the accident, or was it only the effect of his interview with Finney? Whatever it was, he felt the town closing in on him. It was too smug—like Finney and his complacent assumption that he wouldn't want his job back. It was too small, too *neat*.

He searched in his mind for a picture of what the place had looked like five, ten years ago, but didn't get any different picture from the present scene. That was odd. Surely there must have been *some* changes. Or was it so odd? Did a person notice things like that? A person like himself, that was. And he shivered at the thought—suddenly conscious that he had a lot more blanks to fill in yet before he could start assessing just what kind of person he was at all.

Lena broke gently in upon his thoughts. "Can I help?"

He jerked back from a limbo of speculation. "Why?"

"You looked worried. If there's anything—"

"Oh, for heaven's sake leave me alone!"

She didn't answer. And when, moments after, he looked up into her face, she turned it away from him.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled. "I'll try to be patient."

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He did try—*hard*. Tried to endure the inactivity of a life bounded by four walls and a garden—and by his own fragmentary knowledge. But his mind raced, because there wasn't enough for it to get hold of. Plaguing his memory with questions, he gradually built up a picture of his life and surroundings. But there seemed so much lacking. What it was he didn't know, but everything seemed so circumscribed—and he didn't know how to start extending it.

There was the television of course, and he watched it till his eyeballs ached. But it seemed all jokes and music. And the jokes seemed flat, the music monotonous. He'd lie awake at nights, his thoughts chasing themselves round and round, never seeming able to break out.

And then his legs arrived, and everything changed. He was too absorbed in practising with them to worry about anything else, too tired at the end of the day to stay awake for long. It was tough going; he lost count of the number of times he fell. The first couple of times Lena rushed to help him up, but he waved her away. And after that he practised in the bedroom behind a locked door.

The days lengthened into weeks. Weeks of bruises and soreness, and of times when he thought it was a hopeless dream that he would ever be able to walk again. At those times he'd behave badly towards Lena, not being able to help himself. But Lena took it all.

But those black times became less frequent as he persevered and progressed. Until the day came when he unlocked the bedroom door for the last time and made his way nonchalantly to the living room.

"Lena," he called out.

She came in from the kitchen, drying her hands on her apron, and stood stock-still at sight of him. He stood there casually in the middle of the room, one hand in his trouser pocket. Then he pirouetted a full circle with the confidence of a dancer performing a well-rehearsed step. He *had* rehearsed it—a hundred times.

He looked up at her. Her eyes were shining. She came running to him. He held out a hand. "This dance, madame?"

"Oh, *Sam*," she breathed, going into his arms. He held her close, turning with infinite care, *dancing*.

"Do be careful," Lena said, but laughing. "Oh, it's so good, Sam."

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He stopped dancing and looked into her eyes. "Everything's going to be different now, you'll see."

She snuggled against him dreamily. "You mean it's going to be the same as it used to be, darling."

The next weeks were deliriously happy. If this was how things used to be, he told himself, things used to be good. The barriers between him and Lena were down. Being no longer dependent upon her, his resentment of that fact was swept away. So, too, was the sense of shame at being resentful of her kindness. And now he could see her clear—as clear, that is, as a man could who was falling in love with his wife all over again, yet with all the freshness of a first time.

He took her out proudly, brushing aside her protestations as he bought her new clothes, making the rounds of Greenville's eating places. Drinking with her, laughing with her. Laughing *at* her, too, but gently, when she warned him not to over-tire himself. Even when the physical strain did tell on him he could laugh—because he was no longer worrying about himself. Discovering Lena—not as a nurse and devoted companion, but as a wholly delightful person—was much more rewarding than the process of re-discovering himself.

But that task was still waiting. He knew it, knew that these weeks of happiness were only the honeymoon; that some time he had to prepare to lay the foundations for a wider, more permanent happiness. It took an effort, but he made it.

It was then that the awakening came. He spent two days—that was enough for a town Greenville's size—trying to get a job. *Trying*; that was all that came of it. Everyone was very kind, very helpful—but everything was full up.

His optimism, his new-found confidence, kept him going until the very last hope was finished. Even then he wasn't going to give in. One route back to normalcy—and one that might be of help in finding or making a job for himself—was a car. The old one had been junked, Lena had told him. Accordingly, he went into Greenville's only garage.

He'd already tried there for a job, and the affable attitude of Smith, the owner, as Sam walked stiffly in, was tinged with a certain wariness.

"It's all right," Sam told him cheerfully. "I'm not after a job again. I want to buy a car."

"A car?" Smith looked startled.

"Well, why not? Why shouldn't I want a car?"

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" No reason at all, Mr. Bishop. That is . . . just hold on a minute, will you ?"

He came back from the rear after a couple of minutes, looking apologetic.

" I'm sorry, Mr. Bishop, I just remembered. A driving license can't be issued to—I mean, your disability rules you out. The same goes for my license to sell. I—"

" What are you trying to say ?" Sam grabbed the garage owner by the lapels. " There's nothing wrong with me."

" I'm sorry, Mr. Bishop, really I am. But it's the law."

Sam searched his mind. " I've never heard of that law," he said. He released the other's jacket disgustedly. " Who do I see about it ?"

" Well—the mayor, if you like, but it won't be any use, because—"

But Sam was already marching out.

The garage owner was right. It wasn't any use seeing the mayor. That individual was heart-broken that the law was like that, but it *was* the law and there was nothing he could do about it, he explained.

Sam got home in a towering rage. He barked at Lena, cursed himself for doing that, then, trying to explain, wound up with hurling at her a crescendo of indictment against Greenville, the narrowness of its ways, the stupidity of its inhabitants.

" I'm getting sick of the whole set-up," he finished moodily.

" Set-up, Sam ? What set-up ? "

" The way things are," he said. " What did you think I meant ?"

" Why, nothing, Sam."

He glared at her. " I'm sick of the way they treat you when you ask for a job. I'd rather they kicked me in the teeth than be nice. Nice but negative—that ought to be this town's motto. And I'm sick of it. I'm getting restless."

" Sam dear," she said. " Don't fret. You don't have to worry about a job, do you ? We've got enough. Isn't this what you always dreamed of ? Independence ? "

" Did I ?" He searched his mind. " Maybe I did. But I wanted to earn it, not—" his voice was bitter, "—not have it handed me on a plate in exchange for a pair of legs."

" Oh, Sam, you mustn't speak like that. You can be happy. *We* can be happy. We have been, haven't we ?"

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" Of course," he admitted. " But, Lena, don't you see—there has to be more than that ?"

" But there can be." She took him by the arm. " We can do all kinds of things. How about learning to play a musical instrument, or gardening ? You know you always wanted to—" Her voice withered away before the contempt in his look.

" *Hobbies* !" he said, making it sound like a dirty word.

She got up abruptly. " Have a drink, darling. You're tired."

He sighed. " All right. Maybe I am."

She mixed it, and after it he felt slightly better.

" I'm sorry I led off," he said, then smiled ruefully. " I always seem to be apologizing, don't I ?"

" Don't worry about it, dear. Let me get you another drink."

After the fourth in quick succession he looked at her cagily. " Are you trying to get me drunk or something ?"

She smiled. " Why not ?"

" You've got me there," he said wryly, holding out his glass.

He woke up in pitch darkness, one stump hurting badly. His head was making a contest of it. He groaned and hoisted himself on an elbow. Then he saw that the other bed was empty. He frowned and called out. There was no answer.

He switched on the light and strapped his legs on. He looked all over the house. Lena wasn't there. Disturbed, he went out of the house in search of her.

The night was dark. He was about to call out, but restrained himself. No sense in disturbing the neighbours if —as was likely, he tried to convince himself—she had merely gone for a walk. Perhaps she hadn't been able to sleep.

The night air cooled and soothed his aching head. The pain in his stump had ebbed now, too. Obeying a sudden impulse, he set out down the street.

Before long he found himself at the town centre. At this hour it was deserted, the low buildings shrouded in complete darkness. Except one—the Town Hall. A chink of light came from a ground floor window. He was about to turn homeward, in case Lena should get back and start worrying about *his* absence, when a quirk of curiosity made him cross the street.

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He bent his eye to the chink of light—and froze there. Then he turned away, dazed and unbelieving, and shook his head to clear it before he looked again. But it was true. Here, in the main hall, was gathered what looked like the entire adult population of Greenville !

There was Finney—yes, and King and Smith and—*Lena*. She was in the centre of them, her slim figure all but hidden by those gathered about her. She was talking quickly, urgently. By the look of it, anyway, for he could hear nothing. He craned and laid his ear to the glass.

He could hear only muffled scraps of what was being said. Somebody said, " I still say it was unwise to call a general meeting." Another voice said, " That isn't the point—" Another, " It's all right, he's completely out. I made sure of that." And that voice, he realised with a shudder of disquiet, was Lena's ! What's more, they were talking about *him*. He listened with mounting fear.

" He's getting suspicious." That was Lena again. " Restless, too. If once he finds out that—" The rest was lost in a momentary rise in the background noise. " We've got to keep him here, that's certain," was the next he heard, spoken by a voice he didn't recognize. " We'll have to make other plans." After that the voices became quieter—so that he couldn't make out a word.

He backed away from the window, trembling, feeling trapped again. He slumped against the wall, trying desperately to reason it out. There was a conspiracy against him, that much was plain. These people weren't neighbours, they were—*keepers*. The word swam before him. For what did that make Lena ? Not his devoted wife, but only the head keeper ?

No, it couldn't be, he told himself. But it could. He was mad, this was some kind of mental colony. But not a whole town devoted to that purpose, hundreds of people set solely to watch over one man ! That was ridiculous. Anyway, he wasn't mad. Was he ? It wasn't memory that answered him, but his own mind striving to convince him that he wasn't. Then—

The only possible answer came. This was—a *prison*. Not keepers, but *gaolers*.

But why ? What had he done ? And again—why all these people interested in *him* ? And why didn't he know ? His dismembered memory—had that been part of the punishment

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for the crime, so that he didn't even remember committing it? Because in some way even the memory of it was a crime? He shuddered at another thought—his *legs*—was that part of the punishment, too? A grim and horrible substitute for a ball and chain?

He panicked at the thought, fearful of his own ignorance, of people who could nurse under a bland, even a loving, exterior, such dark purposes. He hobbled away, hugging the wall.

He rounded the corner—and sobbed with relief. A car was standing at the kerb. He toppled into it. The noise as he started the engine seemed horribly loud. But he drove his foot down hard and recklessly on the accelerator. The engine responded, and he was away. He didn't know where he was going. He only knew that he had to get away from this place.

As soon as he hit open country he slackened speed and looked back. He thought he could hear other cars being started up. He could certainly see lights.

He drove on, the darkness lightening slightly in front of him. But there was no lightening of the dark confusion in his mind. He kept repeating "*Lena*," over and over to himself, still incredulous that she could have been mixed up in all this.

He turned again, and this time saw headlamps sweeping the sky behind him. His metal leg became a straight rod of determination, holding the accelerator tight against the floor.

It was that that proved calamitous. He saw the bend coming and was ready. But his leg wasn't. It locked. He reached down frantically and knocked it up, but by then it was too late. The road skidded crazily away from under him and he realised that there was an embankment here, that the car had left it and was falling through space. And in that moment he realised far more. In a blinding flash it all came back. He was falling, falling. He screamed—a scream that was cut short as the breath was driven from his body and lights jigged insanely before his eyes . . .

He sprawled there, aware that he was not dead. And then he fought to stop himself screaming, fought to stop himself from going mad.

For he knew now who he was. His name was Sam, certainly—but *Powis*, not Bishop. He knew it—knew, too, that he had never seen Greenville in his life before that day that he

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had been wheeled out of the ambulance. It faded away to the substance of a dream beside the reality. He hadn't been an office manager—but a space pilot. That was the reality that threatened his sanity now.

For he remembered it all. The first flight to another star. One man—Sam Powis—against all that immensity, sent out to seek new sources of uranium for an Earth that had squandered in wars its own store and that of the other planets of Sol.

And how it had all gone wrong, the calculations all astray, so that he had wandered for years in the frightful blacknesses of space . . . his reason crumbling . . . and then—the last hope, swinging near to light and life again. The last nightmarish descent in a broken ship, and . . .

And now he couldn't stop the screams as it all flooded back. The sense of helplessness, the knowledge that he would never make, the crazy turning of the globe beneath him . . .

He stopped screaming abruptly as two facts impinged on his consciousness simultaneously. He *had* made it—and it had been Earth. With instruments and senses alike wild, he hadn't known—or had time to care, any more than a drowning man debates the nature of the driftwood he clutches at. It had been Earth! But he had landed among enemies, smiling enemies who for their own dark reasons had tried to keep his landing secret—secret even from himself. The urgency of danger checked him on the brink of madness. He had to—

But it was too late. Hands were already lifting him from the car. He writhed, whimpering.

"It's all right," voices told him. "You're safe now."

"Leave me alone," he cried. "I know the truth. You're enemies—"

"We are friends," the voices said, as the hands bore him up the hillside. The hands lowered him to the ground and released him. He struggled to get to his feet, then stopped. One metal leg was twisted and useless. He glowered up defiantly. "You'll never get away with this. When the Space Department finds out they'll—"

The men standing round him looked from one to another. One of them was the man who called himself Finney. It was he who said softly, "You remember, then?"

"Yes, I remember—Mr. Finney. I remember that too."

The men conferred in whispers, then Finney said, "We only tried to help. You see, when we pulled you out of the wreckage

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of your ship you were in a bad way. I don't mean only physically. Diagnosis of your mental condition told us that you would be insane when you recovered consciousness. The shock of the crash, coming on top of your years of wandering, would have proved too much. So we sealed off your past and made a new identity for you, a new environment with a new past."

Sam looked up at them bewilderedly. "But *why*? I didn't go mad."

"We miscalculated on more than one point," Finney admitted. "We underestimated your mental resilience. Although I still think that if you had known the truth at the start it would have been too much for you. Besides, there is still one fact that you do not know. Now that you know the rest you must know this, too." He hesitated, then said, watching Sam closely, "That you are not on Earth as you believed. This is another system altogether."

"*What*!" Sam looked from one to another of the faces above him. Then he laughed wildly, "You stand there, telling me that this isn't Earth—telling me in English! Look—"

"Believe me," said Finney in a tone that commanded acceptance. "We are made the same as you. We learned English especially for your sake."

"But Greenville and everything—"

"That was made for your sake, too. You see, we have apparatus to probe minds to their last thought. With our knowledge of mental techniques we could have done one of two things. We could theoretically have blocked your past f om you entirely, then indoctrinated you with our language, our customs—given you, in fact, a Lanjon personality. Lanj is the name of our world.

"But such a total substitution would have been risky, and distasteful to our ethical sense. So—we took the other course. Those things we could copy we left in your mind. The rest we blocked. We made a new background for you. It had to be one small town. After all—" he shrugged apologetically —"we couldn't change the entire planet. We built Greenville, we adapted everything to look like the picture of Earth that we took from your mind. We moved factories there to give the inhabitants a reason for being there. A reason, that is, in case you should ever start wondering.

"For the same reason we supplied you with a past as self-contained, as it were, as possible. In your mind we found

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one dream—of peace, independence, happiness. We tried to make it for you. But we underestimated your restlessness. In my role of boss I couldn't give you a job back that you'd never had, for the simple reason that the goods being made at the Greenville Novelty Company would have been really novelties to you. For another thing, it naturally had links with the outside world, the world that you had to be prevented from wondering about—for your own sake. That was why we had to rustle up a law quickly to prevent you having a car. Otherwise we did all we could. We—"

A thought had suddenly struck Sam. "Don't tell me you even put on those television shows just for me?"

Finney nodded.

Sam grimaced. No wonder the music had seemed monotonous! They must have made it all up out of scraps that they had dug out of his memory. Which accounted for the jokes being stale too. But the effort involved! Hundreds of people learning English, schooling themselves to act like Earth people—and all for his single benefit. It was unbelievable. Yet he believed it. It fitted. He remembered now the little things that had been missing—newspapers, road signs—all such links with a world outside that an ordinary small town would have.

"But why?" he asked Finney. "Why did you go to all that trouble for one man—a stranger at that?"

Finney looked embarrassed. "No man is a stranger," he said at length. "And is it so strange? We saw in your mind, too, memories of your people doing enormous acts of kindness sometimes for one person in distress."

That was right, Sam thought. But what else had they seen? Had they seen the hatred, the suspicion, the destructiveness?

"I am truly sorry," Finney went on, "that we bungled our task. But you understand that it was not easy, that it was a new endeavour for us. We thought that we could make you happy. But when Lena saw that—"

"Lena?" Sam said. "Where is she?"

"I'm here," a voice said. A slim figure stepped forward from behind one of the drawn-up cars.

Sam turned away, cursing himself for having mentioned her name. For the hopelessness of it had dawned upon him. For now that he realised the true size of what she had done for him, he realised something else. That she hadn't done it for *him*. She had done it for a stranger—a crippled stranger at the gate. Just as the rest of this humane people had done

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what they thought had been right, and gone to incredible lengths in the process. She had given herself to him—but only in a charade.

Nobody spoke. He bowed his head and sat there for a long time unmoving. He heard cars start up and move away. When he at last looked up there was nobody there but Lena.

"Go away," he said. "Go back and help take the scenery down." It hurt having to say it, but there was nothing else to ay now.

"But—I want to be with you."

"It's all over now. You can stop acting."

"I'm not acting, Sam. I—I wasn't acting before."

And, staring up at her wonderingly, he knew suddenly that she meant it. He tried to scramble to his feet. She reached down and helped him up.

"When am I going to stop being dependent on you?" he said softly. Then he drooped. "Oh, it's no use. I'm still lost. More than ever. I haven't even got Greenville now—"

She only smiled gently. "Do you need it now?" Taking his weight, she guided him upwards a few steps, then round a spur of rock. He followed her gaze—and took in his breath.

For down below, in a valley, was a great city. At least, city was the nearest word he had for it. Pinnacles and towers, tall and breathlessly graceful, soared up from the mists of dawn, shining like crystal in the light of the rising sun. Bands of pulsing colour arced over it, globes of light hovered in the air. It was more than a group of buildings. There was purpose there—he felt it, even if he couldn't start to divine it.

Standing there, he knew now why these people had done what they had for him. They must have read in him the inhibitions, the fears—must have understood that his mind, waking to a wonderland like this, would have feared the power that could have built it.

But he knew them now. How could he fear people who could set this aside for—Greenville?

He turned back from the vision. "I want to go back," he said to Lena. "To Greenville."

"*Greenville*?" she echoed.

"Yes," he told her, then chuckled at her look of dismay. "I've got to make a start in this world somewhere, haven't I? What better way than helping to take down the scenery myself?"

Arthur Sellings

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Brian Aldiss seldom fails to turn up with a neat twist to his plot ideas and this story is no exception. It might well have been entitled "Greater Love Hath No Man . . ." It deals with the colonisation of a planet that has lost a galactic war millenia before—and before they died the inhabitants booby-trapped their planet. A neat but effective means of retribution. Unfortunately thousands of years passed before the planet was again visited . . .

GESTURE OF FAREWELL

By Brian W. Aldiss

Across this stretch of the planet Risim ran the big groove. It was ten miles wide and over a quarter of a mile deep. A cluster of mobile buildings dotted the road, which ran straight along the middle of the groove. Today, the buildings seemed to crouch closer to the ground, for above them raged the worst storm Risim had experienced in over a thousand years.

Lester Nixon's half-track swerved off the road and headed down a dirt trail for home, St. Elmo's fire dancing along its roof. The violent winds carried rain—not, by ordinary standards, very much rain, but by Risim standards a deluge. Lester smiled with pleasure over it as he ploughed through puddles. He enjoyed the feel of a live planet about him.

Swerving up a steep incline, he came within sight of his house.

As befitted the home of Risim's Resident Governor, the building stood apart from all the others of Sector One, and was on high enough ground to possess a view right across the

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artificial valley. Its exposed position accounted for the fact that the garage was now flat; the gale had blown it over. The unexpected sight of it strewn over the ground was not dismaying enough to wipe the smile off Lester's broad face. Life on Risim was nothing but hard work; rebuilding a garage was a drop in the ocean; Lester was rebuilding a planet.

Lester's smile faded only when he climbed out of the half-track and noticed his wife, Ruthmary, standing in the long, low window of their house. Leaving the vehicle in the open, he limped across to the door and let himself in, pushing through the airlock which was no longer needed.

"What's for supper?" he asked heartily, directly she appeared in the hall.

You could not deflect Ruthmary as simply as that.

"Lester! I thought you were *never* coming home!" she exclaimed, pressing the palms of her hands together. "Oh, I've been so *scared*! You've no idea how awful it's been up here. I thought we'd all be blown away. Why are you so late?"

"Communications wanted help," Lester said, taking her hand. "They had a line down, and it'll be needed when Sector Six comes through tonight."

"A line down!" she said, staring into his face. "They had a line down, so you stayed to help them—never mind that we had a whole *garage* down!"

"Try and keep your sense of proportion, Rue," he said quietly, stripping off his oilskins and going over to the coal fire. "The garage can be re-erected at any time."

She fluttered before him like a bird. She was a good-looking forty, although just now her face was blotchy with strain.

"I'm keeping my sense of proportion," she said. "You're losing yours, Lester. You're letting this planet become your life. While you were putting that line up, I don't suppose you once thought of me, did you?"

She interpreted his silence correctly.

"No . . ." she said, in a wounded tone. "It's getting to be Risim first and last with you. You love the place. You think of it as yours! You keep forgetting what kind of people the Risimians were. You keep forgetting they must have left a booby trap for us . . . This isn't a planet to love; it's a planet to hate."

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He heard, but for a long while did not reply; he was looking out of the window. Most of the land along the ten-mile-wide groove was now under cultivation, semi-outdoor cultivation. Some of the old airtight domes were being used still for more experimental crops. Trees and wheat fields and acres of root vegetables met Lester's eye; he could see some Shorthorns on Darbie's farm being driven in to milk. The uplands beyond the groove were thatched here and there with green. It was all good to look upon. The vista Lester's inward eye saw was something different. It had no green anywhere about it. When Lester had arrived on Risim, as a junior member of the Reclamation Force advance party, all this landscape had been white with CO_2 rhime. Bare earth, bare rock, stretched everywhere. Nothing grew. Planetary atmosphere was about a foot deep.

That was fifteen years ago. The RF had made the rock flower.

"It is a planet to love," Lester Nixon said, turning back to his wife as a fresh cascade of rain swept the windows.

Ruthmary was staring out too. He did not need telling what she saw. She saw only the arbitary miles-wide furrow chopped out by the giant excavators, the humble quarters of Sector One, the jagged background of unreclaimed land, pitted still by a thousand years of falling meteorites. Certainly, Risim was still not a woman's world; Ruthmary's expression told Lester she might have been looking over the wastes of Hell.

"Love!" she said, making it sound like a dirty word. "Risim's a desert, and a few blades of grass won't conceal the fact. It killed little Alec; it has swallowed up our youth. And if you can say you love it, you must be mad."

"I asked you never to mention Alec, Rue," he said, mildly enough. Talk of his dead son reminded him of his daughter. "Where's Jackie?"

"Upstairs," she said shortly.

As Lester made to go, Ruthmary caught his arm.

"You know the real reason why I hate Risim, Lester," she half-whispered.

"Yes. You're afraid it may blow up at any minute," he said steadily, refusing to look into her eyes.

"Not at *any* minute," she said. "At *every* minute. I'm always afraid—not just for myself: for Jackie, for you, even for the convicts. Angagulalatun blew up. So did Cobatt II.

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So did Vicinzo. The Reclamation Forces on all of them were destroyed."

"We may be luckier," he said curtly, for this was something he had no wish to discuss. "Don't think of it."

Her nails were biting into his sleeve. She was shouting now, to make herself heard above the wind.

"I can't stop thinking of it!" she said. "Can't you see, Lester, I'm asking you to let me go back to Earth. I just can't bear it here any longer. I've got to go!"

"Alone?" he asked.

"Why not? You—" she cried, then stopped, reading the look on his face, realising what she had just said.

"Oh, Lester . . ." she began, suddenly cold. She could see how deeply she had hurt him by her indifference. It came back to her that she knew Lester very well; always living with someone makes us forget they are not strangers. He was an odd man, with a sensitive side to his nature which could never find expression in words. Now he staggered as if she had sunk a pickaxe into him.

"Lester, my dear, I didn't mean—" she started. But he went out, slamming the door in her face, not waiting for her explanation. And what was there to explain? They had abruptly stopped loving each other: it was inexplicable. Ruthmary leaned against the door; she listened to its slamming over and over again in her mind, dreading its implications. Lester did not slam doors. He was the kind who always left them open.

The daylight grew weirder now. Lester, as he ran up the stairs to Jackie, glanced out at the purple glare; Risim had never looked like this before. All round the sun floated pale sun-dogs, phantoms of the real thing, and behind them wavered the aurora—the new aurora. The garish effect, when it could be glimpsed through cloud, was of polka dots imposed on shot silk.

Before he opened her door, Lester could hear Jackie sobbing. He went in and found her lying across the bed, her toes stubbing the floor, rucking up the bedside rug. She did not look up when he spoke her name. Sitting beside her, Lester rested his hands on her thin shoulders. He thought: perhaps our worst troubles come when we are thirteen years old, when we've lost the resilience of childhood and have yet to gain the strength of an adult.

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" You're a big girl to be scared by a little storm," he said aloud.

She looked up then, her face tear-stained.

" Mummy says the planet may blow up at any minute," she said.

That, of course, would be it. The anger came up like choking fumes in Lester's throat. He coughed it down and said, " Now listen, Jackie girl, what's going on outside has nothing to do with anywhere blowing up. That's just one of your mother's silly stories, and I'm going to tell you a far nicer one."

" What's yours about ?" she asked suspiciously, flinching as the room was deluged in lightning.

" My story's about why the air is behaving so funnily outside," he said. " I want to tell you why it's a good thing and not a bad thing. You see, when you were born, lying in your cradle in this self-same room, you could look out of the window and see space coming right down and touching the bare land. Well, maybe by then there was air in the groove, but there was not much to spread about elsewhere. You could see the stars come right down and touch those distant mountains, even by day.

" But every month, the view changed just a little. As you grew up, so did Risim. As you put on weight, it put on air. You two have grown up together.

" Now it seems as if Risim is coming of age. Why, the air's breathable almost half a mile up—it will soon be settled enough for us to be able to use planes and helicopters. You've seen how in every sector the land's coming back to life again; now the air's doing the same. It's not just so many thousand cubic yards of released oxygen and carbon dioxide any more: it's a planetary atmosphere. An ionosphere is in the process of establishing itself. That's what all the noise and colour is about."

" I don't think I want to live on a planet with an 'onosphere" Jackie said, making bubbly noises into a handkerchief.

" It should soon settle down," Lester replied. " Then we won't notice it any more. In fact it'll be a great help to us for radio and suchlike. At present, the ultra-violet from the sun is charging all the gas particles in the sky; and although it may sound and look rather alarming, it's really a sign that all our work here is being blessed."

Jackie cocked her head on one side to peer into his solemn face.

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"Mummy says you've got a creator-complex," she announced. "What is a creator-complex, Daddy?"

It was not a time when Lester Nixon wanted personal troubles. His schedules for the next few days were even busier than usual. On the morrow he had to drive over to Sector Three, Tod Clitheroe's sector, and officiate at the ocean seeding. Sector Six, as Lester had reminded Ruthmary, was advancing to its new territories in the night; he would have to visit them within the next two or three days to see that the basic planning jobs were carried out efficiently.

Tired, Lester went early to bed. Usually he allowed himself twenty minutes of constructive thought before sliding smoothly into sleep. Tonight, the thoughts were not constructive, nor would they let him rest. He worried about Jackie, he worried about Ruthmary. The unfortunate thing was that he could see his wife's point of view; she cared for the refinements of life, which were scarce on Risim. Even her beloved music tapes were few and well-worn. And although she could, in her fashion, appreciate the mighty transformation of Risim, she discounted it with the thought that it might all blow to Kingdom Come at any day.

So she blamed all her troubles on Lester, who had brought her here as a bride. She believed he thought himself a God, bringing light where there was only darkness, and she had begun to hate him for it.

"Now she's trying to win Jackie over to her ideas," Lester muttered aloud. Brushing his hair back from his forehead, he sat up in bed. Ruthmary's breathing came steadily from the other side of the room. Beyond the shutters, the aurora still fluttered.

Lester got out of bed, dressed, went downstairs. It was nearly midnight. He had never felt less like sleep.

After some indecision, he put on thick clothes and boots, slung an oxygen mask over his shoulder in case it should be needed, and let himself into the night air.

The cold knocked his cheekbones. Twenty degrees of frost, he estimated. It would be sharper than that before morning, under the thin air blanket. Lester could remember when evening brought dips of two hundred degrees below freezing. He was getting old; he could remember too much.

Without bothering to drag out the half-track, he walked down into the centre of the groove. It was a fine night. The

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rain, the thin cloud, had gone; only the aurora remained, flapping overhead like a gigantic mauve bat. In the distance, the combined wheels of Sector Six could be heard, moving up the highway. You couldn't hear a thing on Risim in the old days.

For this special occasion, Sector One's only filling station was open and ablaze with light. Lester limped over to it, greeting its owner and standing with him by the pumps as the leading vehicles of the big convoy appeared down the road.

These RF vehicles were leviathans. They towered like ships as they lumbered by. Bulldozers, eledozers, rocksnorkers, grabs, drills, furnaces and pounders, some tracked, some on balloon tyres as high as a house, some on trailers, they began to growl majestically past the garage. Machines had ruined Risim over a thousand years ago; now machines—these machines—were patching her up again.

Behind the RF vehicles came the smaller traffic, mainly mobile living quarters. It would be twelve hours before they had all passed.

A landrover swerved into the garage, and a squat man swaddled in furs jumped out.

"I thought that was you, Governor!" he exclaimed. "How're you doing?"

Lester shook hands warmly with him. This was Brandy Mireball, Commander of Sector Six, and an old friend of Lester's.

They talked eagerly together for some minutes, swinging their arms to keep warm, until Lester said, "Your convoy looks as if it could forge on without you to wet nurse it for an hour or two. Come on up to the house for a warm-up and a gossip."

At once a look of reserve passed over Brandy's big, square face.

"Er—well, no, I'd better be moving, Governor," he said. "Besides, you don't want to trouble your wife at this time of night."

Or at any other time, Lester thought grimly. He had forgotten that Brandy was, officially, a convict; now he recalled the frosty reception Ruthmary had given him the last and only time they had met. Brandy had too much pride in him to welcome a repetition of that meeting.

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Ruthmary, unlike Lester, had never failed once in the last fifteen years to remember that ninety-nine percent of the men under her husband were the offerings of other planets' jails. He preferred to think of himself as the creator of a world, rather than the governor of a penal settlement. But of course only criminals could be expected to operate on a planet that might disintegrate at any time.

" There's a room ahind my office you like to borrer," the owner of the garage volunteered.

" Thanks," Lester said.

The room was comfortable and had a good coal fire burning; coal was the cheapest fuel in Sector One, wood the dearest. Lester meditated briefly on what a fine thing it was that he had to bring a friend here to entertain him. Even a governor was inescapably governed.

Brandy was full of information about the new territory Sector Six was taking over. It was nothing but shop, and Lester listened with interest. The territory would not be easy to lick into shape; preliminary surveys had indicated that it was mainly high ground, broken and fissured by a thousand years of extremes of heat and cold.

" And it contains the ruins of the chief city of Risim," said Brandy, looking hard at Lester.

Lester shrugged.

" It'll all have to go," he said. " Those are always RF orders: obliterate every trace of the enemy civilization."

" I know that. I'm not worried about that," Brandy said. " I think you know, too, what I'm driving at, Governor. If there's a booby trap anywhere on Risim, waiting to blow us to bits, chances are it'll be in the capital city."

" It wasn't in the capital on Cobatt II."

" It was on Angagulalatan. And on Vicinzo."

Silence drifted like ice between the two men.

" I've got some drink here, Governor," Brandy said, sheepishly bringing a flask out of his pocket. " Have a swig."

Lester accepted gratefully. He had not had a drink since the last time he and Brandy had met. The stuff was supposed to be prohibited, but the more settled the planet became, the more drink there was about. Some of the men seemed to have stills working directly they pitched camp.

" Just how seriously do you take this booby trap business, Brandy?" Lester asked.

" I don't let it rule my life," Brandy said cautiously.

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" But do you seriously believe the Risimians would stoop to such a thing? They were an old and cultured race."

Brandy laughed harshly. " What a question!" he said. " Men'll stoop to anything. Besides, look at it from the Risimians' point of view. They were our enemies. Right? That galactic bust up, the Hub Wars, was about the toughest thing that's ever happened. And the Gobbleis that won the war for us were about the nastiest weapons ever invented. Right? They could make a planet uninhabitable within an hour—as they did here. Now: if you think your planet's going to be made uninhabitable, what do you say to yourself? You say, Right, then it stays uninhabitable; if we can't live on it, no other ————'s going to, either.

" And it's a simple enough matter, if you're as advanced as Cobatt or Vicinzo—or Risim—was, to plant a little device that will be triggered off when the enemy finally gets to it."

They argued the point back and forward, as every man on Risim had done ever since the RF landed, fifteen years ago. The trouble was, that the vital issue—whether or not the Risimians had planned revenge—would always remain open: until Risim blew up or a booby trap was discovered.

A second bottle was produced and drunk between them before Brandy got up to go.

" Give my regards to Clitheroe when you see him," he said, adding, as Lester attempted to rise, " Don't bother to come outside."

" Right ho," Lester replied, rather thickly. " I'll be over to see how you're getting on in two or three days, Brandy. Keep your fingers crossed."

When the other had gone, he did try to rise from his chair, but he was heavy with the unaccustomed drink. Leaning back before the fire, he fell fast asleep.

Cold fury boiled in him when he woke and found it was nearly eight o'clock in the morning. His days began at six. The owner of the filling station would have seen him; Lester could almost hear the whisper spreading round the community: 'The Governor was in a drunken stupor!' This would never have happened if he had felt free to take Brandy home.

He went out into the bitter morning, peevishly buttoning his coat. The wind was as spiteful as ever, the aurora still up to its silly tricks. The convoy of Sector Six still poured by;

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Lester could see sleepy men at the steering wheels. A girl smiled at him through a trailer window.

He arrived home to find his wife and Jackie starting breakfast. Frosty looks greeted his explanations and apologies; he felt his neck grow red.

" I'm not feeling humble this morning, Rue," he said, " so don't make too much capital out of the incident."

" You never feel humble these days," she said indistinctly.

A thousand years of silence seemed to lumber in from outside and engulf them. Lester helped himself unhappily to breakfast. Ruthmary was probably right: he had the sort of occupation to make men overbearing—which did not make the truth any more palatable. It would do Ruthmary no harm to be humbled, either.

" I'm going to drive over to see Clitheroe in Sector Three in half an hour," he said, addressing himself to Jackie. " How about your taking a day off and coming with me, eh ?"

" She's got to go to school," Ruthmary said before Jackie could answer.

" A visit to the sea would be equally instructive," Lester said, looking only at his daughter.

" It's her music day," Ruthmary said. " And you know she has an exam coming soon."

Yes, Lester knew. And in another year, when Jackie was fourteen, she was going back to Earth, to Milan, to learn music properly. And then he would have lost touch irrevocably with her, for Lester expressed himself even more haltingly in letters than he did in speech. So he had to win her onto his side before she went: he was shrewd enough to see that from now on there were going to be sides, and only sides.

" Well, Jackie, would you like to come ?" he asked temptingly. " It'll be an historic occasion for Risim you know : more important than when we released the micro-organisms into the soil here."

It was painful to see her looking from one to the other of her parents, like a trapped animal. Young as she was, she sensed that a lot hung on her decision. Her cheeks coloured with resentment.

" I suppose I ought to go to school. oughtn't I ?" she asked them, pleading for a helpful answer.

" They wouldn't miss you for one day," Lester said.

" You must make up your own mind," Ruthmary said.

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The little girl stared at them desperately. All of a sudden, she burst into tears and ran from the room.

"That was entirely your fault," Ruthmary said.

Perhaps it was the way she said it that made Lester do what he ever afterwards regretted. When he drove off to Sector Three in the half-track, Jackie rode delightedly beside him, her tears forgotten. He had crept upstairs and brought her down without her mother knowing; even at the time it was not a trick he felt particularly proud of.

To Lester's mind, it was a good day for a drive. The morning's snow, as the temperature rose rapidly, fell for only ten minutes. The sun shone blindingly among the drapes of the aurora. St. Elmo's fire flickered on every protuberence of their vehicle.

They turned out of the groove onto a minor road which cut away from the highway at right angles. This portion of the huge RF chequer-board had yet to be leap-frogged over by one of the reclamation sectors; consequently, it was still in much the same state that the Gobblers had left it, ten centuries ago. Once, dark under the eerie sky, a furnace swung into view and dropped behind them, its funnel-like chimneys continuously pouring hot oxygen into the atmosphere.

Establishing these mighty furnaces regularly over the face of Risim had been the RF's first task. The furnaces were automatic. Tunnelling further and further below them into the rock were the mechanical miners. In a screaming inferno of heat and dust, tireless drills ferretted coal, ores and oxides out of the ground, shuttled them into lifts, and rocketed them up to the furnaces, where they were pulverised and baked. As the great detrius hills grew to mountains outside the plants, so more vital gas was liberated.

Already, as Lester happily pointed out to Jackie, nature was helping the artificial processes in her own way. For a considerable distance round the black bulk of the furnace, green showed. Near the walls were bushes, even a few stunted conifers, which gave place further out to grass or lichen.

"It's wonderful what a little air and continuous heat will do," Lester remarked. "All that foliage is self-sown, from spores and seed, in the ground which have endured a thousand years of space conditions. It just goes to show that Nature's on our side."

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"And which side are the Risimians on?" Jackie asked.

"You are developing a bad habit of asking irrelevant questions, young lady!" he exclaimed. "Don't forget *we're* the Risimians now."

After three hours of fast driving, without once seeing another vehicle, they dipped down into another groove, ten miles across, a quarter mile deep—standard RF measurements. The air was noticeably better to breathe in the depression.

This was Sector Three.

Lester asked their way to Tod Clitheroe's building, and soon the lanky commander was shaking their hands. They all made a good meal while Clitheroe told them his plans for the afternoon's ceremony.

Sector Three was generally regarded as one of the softest stations on Risim; a rather sour wine set on the table confirmed that opinion. No other sector could afford to grow vines. Lester had a momentary sense of unease at this cool infringement of planetary law, but banished it. It was one of those human problems which has to be tackled when the time is ripe.

"Are you sure you want me to make a speech to them?" Lester asked, when Clitheroe broached the idea.

"Sure," Clitheroe said. "We've got to have a proper ceremony."

"I'm not the kind who makes a very good speech," Lester protested. "And our boys aren't the kind who make very good listeners."

"They'll listen. They've got to realise they aren't just working gangs and wives any more: they're citizens of an up-and-coming planet."

That also made Lester uncomfortable. He was not happy with personal problems. He was a Reclamation man, an engineer. The trouble was, he had no precedents to guide him: the other reclaimed planets, Vicinzo and the rest, had blown up before this stage. But obviously—just as the time had come when their air was no longer simply measurable quantities of gas, but an atmosphere—the day was dawning when he had, not a number of task forces, but a population on his hands. It sounded frightening to Lester.

Nevertheless, he made a good speech.

He spoke in a barrack-like warehouse—the only warehouse—by the water's edge. Outside, the wind screamed. Inside,

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some three hundred men, women and children had drifted from their work to hear him talk. Jackie stood at the front of the crowd, admiring her father.

"From today on," he began, without preliminaries, "a new trade is open on Risim: fisherman, though to begin with the fishers will put fish in the sea instead of pulling them out. This town of Clitheroeville is on the way up. After the fishermen'll come the sailors, then the ship-builders, then the dockers, then the customs men—but we hope we'll never need them !—then the millionaires." They laughed at that.

"You people have now got a sea on your hands. It's only a little one, but it'll grow. It's like all the processes we've started in this barren land: once you start it, it goes on of its own accord. Before you know it, there'll be an ocean where you had a puddle. But it's not just going to be wet water. It's going to live: before we've done it's going to be full to the brim with crabs and shrimps and fish and mighty big blowing whales. It's going to be a howling success, like everything else we've done here.

"That's why Commander Clitheroe and I are going down with the Biology Corps now, to stock the waters with plankton: so that in several years' time you can all have caviare in your lunch packs !"

Their cheering bouyed him all the way down to the jetty. Braving wind and fresh rain, most of the crowd followed the official party as far as the cliffs.

'The cliffs' were the sides of an enormous M-bomb crater which had been blasted into existence perhaps only a few days before the Gobblers did their deadly work on Risim. They fell steeply for two hundred tawny feet; the party spanned this distance in an open lift, which swayed furiously in the gusty up-draughts playing along the cliffs.

Below, protruding from a ledge of rock, was the jetty, a temporary affair since the water level was expected to be rising for the next century. Against the jetty, a cumbrous amphibian, Risim's only boat, slumped and lifted on the waves. On its bow was painted its name: 'Old Greedy Guts.' Against boat and jetty smacked the full force of the new sea.

Roughly rectangular, the sea was at present only one mile wide by five long. Old ocean beds to the south, whose waters had evaporated when the atmosphere went, would take its

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continued expansion. Started six years ago by a spring, one of many rising unsummoned from the reviving ground, the sea was now fed by several small streams.

For such a baby stretch of water, the sea looked menacing enough. It was dark and it was rough. Every wave seemed blacker than the one before, breaking without foam against the tall cliffs.

" Are you going to like this, Jackie ?" Lester asked, with some misgivings.

" I'm going to make a film of it !" she replied, waving her cinecamera eagerly.

Willing hands helped them aboard. Lester caught Jackie looking almost skittishly at the young biologist who pulled her up. He thought, perhaps Rue's right: we don't want the girl messing about with a lot of criminals—it's best for her to go to Earth now she is growing up. And then he rebuked himself bitterly for the thought. He was getting old: the strain was telling on him.

Dismissing all but the present from his mind, Lester followed Clitheroe over to the biologists. ' Old Greedy Guts ' cast off, her engines throbbing, and began to wallow out towards mid-ocean. The few spectators in the jetty turned their backs to the cutting wind and hurried for shelter.

The seeding ceremony was outwardly unimpressive. Four great tanks full of water containing laboratory-reared plankton stood along the decks of the amphibian; pipes led from them over the side of the vessel: when they reached mid-ocean, the cocks would be opened and the microscopic life released into the open waters.

" I think it's too rough to reach what for want of a better term we must call mid-ocean," the chief biologist told Clitheroe and Lester. " If it's all the same to you, we'll release our load and turn back at once."

Looking pretty sick, he stared anxiously into other green faces, in search of agreement.

" I'm all for it," Clitheroe said. " We're not meant to be sailors. As the Governor says, they'll come later."

The cocks were opened. Everyone peered over the side, Jackie leant dangerously out, filming the dark waters. Yet there was nothing to see. The tanks emptied under the surface, and the additional billions to Risim's inhabitants, being in-

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visible, gave no sign of their presence. At an impatient sign from the chief biologist, the skipper leaned against the wheel, swinging ' Old Greedy Guts ' about.

The deck lurched, a fresh gust of wind buffeted them. Dropping her cinecamera, Jackie caught off balance, snatched at the low side and missed it. She screamed briefly as she hit the vinegar-dark sea.

Lester was actually the third to dive in after her. Two young members of the biology team beat him to it.

Every molecule of water ached with cold. The bite of it was like cruel jaws, penetrating down to the marrow. Before Lester surfaced, he could feel it beginning to kill him; he came up gasping for help and splashing towards the ship's side.

As Clitheroe and others dragged him out, he saw, half-fainting, that crimson stained the threshing water by the propellors. Sun-dogs seemed to leap at his throat as he lost consciousness.

" So you've come at last, Brandy," Lester said, trying to conceal the irritation he felt.

" I only came here because I had to," Brandy Mireball said. He spoke uneasily, looking round the Governor's room as if he expected Ruthmary to burst in, and seldom glancing at Lester.

" It was two days ago that I phoned you," Lester said, twitching at the rug wrapped about his knees.

" We were busy," Brandy said. " I was sorry about your daughter, Governor. Hope your wife didn't take it too hard?

Perhaps even as he spoke, Brandy guessed that Ruthmary had taken it hard. He might have read it in the atmosphere of Lester's house, or on Lester's face. No doubt he could hear, through the intervening doors, the stormy music issuing from the study. Lester could picture his wife standing entranced before the tape machine, palms pressed together, eyes shut, trying—what was she trying to do? It baffled Lester. She drew something from music he could never find. Now she was playing ' The Atomics ' from Dinkuhl's Managerial Suite; it was one of her favourites. She seemed to find in it the something Lester had found when listening to the wind cutting across the new sea before—before little Jackie was churned into the propellors.

Ruthmary had taken the news as a personal insult. When Lester returned, dosed against pneumonia, to tell her of the

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accident, she had wailed like a Greek tragedy. First Alec, crushed long ago in a collapsing dome, now Jackie ! Risim was against them all: Risim would kill them all ! She turned her misery into a triumph.

Wearily, Lester tried to direct his thoughts away from his wife. She was, of course, right: it was all his fault. Now he must make her what amends he could.

" There's something I had to tell you, Brandy," he said looking up from under his heavy eyebrows. " Come next month, you are Resident Governor of Risim, in my place."

The great purgatorial chords ascended in the stillness; she was playing that thing too damn loud.

" What do you mean, Lester ?" Brandy asked. " What's happening to you ?"

" I'm going . . . ' He choked on the words.

" Going home ? "

" This is home, Brandy. I'm going back to Earth."

There was time to listen to the frantic cellos again before Brandy said, " You run Risim, boss ! You can't clear out on us now, not before the Twenty Year Plan is finished. I can't believe it ! Nobody'll believe it !"

Lester made a testy gesture.

" It's true," he said shortly. " You'll have to get used to it. The people will follow you—you're their kind."

" Yes . . . a convict. I know." Brandy put his hands to his head, then lowered them again. " Why are you quitting on us like this, Governor ?" he saked softly. " It's not just because of the little girl, is it ?"

Lester shook his head.

" I promised my wife . . ." he said.

He sat there inarticulately. He wanted to explain that a man's duty before all else is to his wife, that she must be considered before even life-long companions—certainly before a planet that might at any time unlock violently into its individual atoms. He wanted to explain all the complex loops of reasoning he had staggered through alone. But he just sat there enduring the other's scorn. He could tell it was scorn: Brandy had no patience with the whims of women.

" Thanks for the promotion, anyhow," Brandy said at last. " It looks as if you're getting out of Risim just in time."

" What do you mean ?" Lester asked.

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" I was not coming over here to hear what you had to say, but to tell you my news. Care to hear it now ?"

Lester looked up questioningly.

" We've found Risim's booby trap, we think," Brandy said. " I'd come to fetch you to have a look at it."

He watched Lester's face with interest as the Governor stood up, the rug flopping about his feet.

" You can sit down again," Brandy said. " We'll manage this ourselves."

In those cold words, Lester saw the kind of reputation he was in danger of leaving behind him on the planet he had made. When they spoke of him at all, they would speak of him as a coward. They were not subtle people here ; they were as harsh as the world around them and would—could—only soften as it softened. Under their code of behaviour, a thing was either black or white: if Governor Lester Nixon did not go to see the booby trap, it was because Governor Lester Nixon was scared. Nobody realised that more clearly than Lester himself.

" I'm coming with you, Mireball," he said. " Next month's a month away."

" Lester ! "

Both men turned at the cry. Ruthmary had come unnoticed into the room. From the expression on her face, they realised she had heard Brandy's news. Her countenance was the colour of dirty snow.

" My husband is on the verge of a breakdown, Mr. Mireball," she said stiffly.

" So's Risim," Brandy replied, buttoning up his coat with brisk fingers.

Without a word, Lester went over and kissed Ruthmary on the forehead. Pulling his outdoor clothes from a peg, he followed Brandy into the hall. Ruthmary stood where she was, transfixed, long after the outer door had slammed.

Brandy had a two-tonner with self-hauling grabs standing ready before the house, a driver lounging at its wheel. It was a typical, ugly, self-sufficient RF machine, and it did Lester's heart good to see it, as he climbed into the back beside Brandy.

" Sure you're fit enough for this ?" Brandy asked.

" Start her up," Lester said tensely.

It was a long haul into the territory Sector Six had just taken over. When they left the settled limits of Sector One,

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the change in landscape was very noticeable. Though the road continued, the ten-mile-wide groove ended: geonivorous machines were chewing out an extension of it now, working in a hell of pulverised rock particles. Beyond the geonivores, it was more peaceful, but bleaker. The two tonner climbed snarling into low mountains which, on their shattered and sad flanks, bore witness to their exposure to space. Even here, the vital air-furnaces had been built, crouching among their hills of ash. As the vehicle climbed, the air grew thinner, the heavens darker. The wind died to tooth-comb fineness. Yet even here, Lester noticed, life was limping back to sheltered ridges, showing green among the slate greys.

They echoed their way through a pass and began to descend. Before them, in a valley, lay the remnants of the capital city of old Risim. It lay split open, like a beached whale, with the massed impedimenta of Sector Six all round it in a wide circle. There was something wrong with the picture.

"You've got an unusual grouping down there," Lester commented to Brandy, as they looked out of the observation blister.

"It's not from choice," Brandy said. "Our stuff is spread round in such a wide circle just because they can't get in any further. There's something in the middle of the city stopping them: a power-damper field, extending half a mile in all directions. It must come from the booby trap the Risimians left."

"Must?"

Brandy turned to face his superior squarely.

"What else would it be?" he asked. "I've never really understood your attitude to this business, Governor. Angagulalatun, Vicinzo and Cobatt II were booby-trapped; Risim, in its heyday, was as much Earth's enemy as they were—don't you think it would have laid the same sort of trap for us as our other enemies?"

"Perhaps I've never really faced up to the problem in all the years we've been here," Lester said. "I enjoyed RF work: I've never thought of Risim as an enemy planet."

"You'll have to face it now."

"Risim may be different from the other worlds."

"Why should it be?" Brandy asked bluntly.

"Because every world is different," Lester said, "and every race is different, just as every man is different. The traps on Angagalalatun and Cobatt and Vicinzo were themselves all

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different. Cobatt blew almost directly the RF set foot on it. On Angagulalatun, nothing happened until an air pressure of five pounds had been established at sea level. And the trap on Vicinzo must have had some kind of encephalic trigger: the place blew after the RF had been there thirteen years and the population numbered twenty thousand."

"All right, we die a different way," Brandy said gloomily. "It'll feel the same . . ."

"But we've got some kind of a chance here, don't you see," Lester said. "On the other RF planets, they never knew what hit them. Here we have something we can tackle."

While they were talking the two-tonner had rolled down to the outskirts of the town. Traffic police directed them amid a chaos of camping; among silent vehicles, tents had been pitched, and silent women stood about in groups. They bumped over rock and rubble to a parking space.

"Another hundred yards forward and the engine would have conked," Brandy said, offering Lester a hand down. "Nothing functions in the anti-power field."

The stillness was eerie. The ionosphere having established itself, the days-long storm had died and the aurora faded into the sky. Now temperatures were falling towards night.

"We'll tackle the booby-trap in the morning," Brandy said. "Right now, let's get a drink."

"I'd like to see it now," Lester said.

Brandy shrugged.

"As you like," he said.

They walked forward together. Beyond the stalled vehicles, the power-damper field began. It manifested itself faintly on their body electricity, making their skins itch. Lester's head swam and his lame leg dragged, but he knew that only his own physical condition was to blame for that.

The city closed round them. Of its might, little was left but stone and rubble; great pyramids of crumbling debris told of the milennium in which space, that great sea, had had its high tide over the land. And already on the pyramids, like scraggy hens pecking out a living, weeds grew and a toad crawled. Picking their way through the destruction, Brandy and Lester came to the booby trap.

Clusters of men stood beside it, eyeing it without speaking. Their faces were stiff with tension: their expressions looked to have been written indelibly across their skulls.

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Once, before the defeat of Risim, the booby trap had stood in an open square; now rubble covered half of it. It was a featureless dome, rising at its highest point to less than eight feet. It looked no more impressive than an esquimo's igloo.

The grim-faced men were turning to go.

"We'd better be going, too," Brandy said. "There's nothing else to see. We'll tackle the problem tomorrow."

They followed the silent groups back through the dusk. Everyone was hurrying now: even torches would not burn in the power-damper field. Tomorrow, men would come with spades and uncover the rest of the dome, seeking an entrance. And then . . . and then it was anybody's guess what happened, Lester thought.

Despite all his other worries, he found himself thinking of the way he had left Ruthmary, with matters unresolved between them. He did not want to be blown to hell with their affairs in that state. At the time, Lester's leaving home with Brandy had seemed fine: he was going to show them all he was no coward; now, in among the ruins, he knew he would have been braver to have stayed with Ruthmary and let everyone else think what they would.

He climbed early into the bunk Brandy provided in his four-room trailer, hoping for sleep to cover his weakness. Sleep did not come. Instead, his mind floated back to the last days of the Risimians, and he pictured the terrible weapon with which Earth had crushed them. The Gobblers: that was the universal name for what were officially called aerdetergands; half a dozen of them could wipe an atmosphere clean off a planet in half an hour.

The Gobblers were big. At the height of the Hub Wars, Earth owned no more than six of them: but six were all that were needed. They hurtled in upon their victims on low, intra-atmospheric orbits. They leeched air through their great bodies, dis-bonding it as it went, and spraying it far out into space, where it could never return. This implacable and terrifying ingestion of atmosphere produced the typical Gobbler noise, a sustained belch, audible all round the globe. When the belch rose to a howl and the howl to a scream and the scream to an echo of a shriek, the Gobblers had finished their ugly meal—and a planet lay dead beneath them.

The Gobblers were the most evil weapon ever produced. They won the Hub Wars for Earth: but the harvest of hatred

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they sowed had still to be fully reaped. No wonder most of the vanquished enemy races had seen to it that any world the Gobblers stripped remained for ever uninhabitable.

After the Wars, Earth herself had been so weakened that a thousand years had lapsed before she could stretch forth her hand and touch the fruits of her victory—only to find them fruits of death.

In the blind dark, hopelessness gripped Lester. For fifteen years, he had been putting this vision away from him. So busy had he been recreating a world, he had not realised on what it was he built. Others, less absorbed, had known all along—and feared.

Ruthmary had feared.

He had been so obtruse. He remembered how clumsily he had tried to console her for Jackie's death. He had said: "From the sea comes life. Now Jackie is there, as imperishable as the plankton, starting a whole new chain of life."

At that, Ruthmary had wept more bitterly, and Lester had not understood why.

He was glad when the frozen dawn came and he climbed out of bed to escape from the past.

The ambiguous dome lay exposed to the sky. About it, shuffling uneasily on the rubble they had cleared, stood a crowd of RF men; a hopeless instinct for flight competed in them with curiosity.

The dome was featureless. Built of a strange, semi-translucent metal, it was untouched by time or heat or cold. Lester limped round it twice and then returned to Brandy. They stood silent. Silence lay like a malediction over everything.

Brandy licked his numb lips.

"Looks as if it won't hurt us if we don't hurt it," he said, speaking in a low voice. "How about evacuating this sector for good? We've got the rest of the planet to work on."

"As long as this remains," Lester said, "we've got nothing. It would always mock our safety."

"Right, Governor, tell us what we do about it then," Brandy said. "Don't forget, as long as it transmits this power-damper, we can't bring up anything more ferocious than a spade against it."

"The damper field must be there for something more than just to draw our attention to the dome," Lester said thoughtfully. He fell silent, trying to work it out. This thing, he

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knew, was something different from that which the other RF worlds had yielded; this was no efficient but crude time bomb, such as had shattered the ill-famed Angagulalatun and Vicinzo. The Risimians had been more subtle in their gesture of farewell.

Obviously, they had intended that no power should be used to break open the dome. What, then, was the key required to open what a thousand years of silence had kept locked?

There could be only one answer . . .

Lester turned to the anxious phalanxes of men. He had no need to attract their attention: every eye was on him. Stiffly, he raised his right hand above his head.

"When I drop my hand," he said in a clear voice, "I want you all to shout 'Hey' as loudly as possible. Right?"

He dropped his hand.

The response, from two hundred choked throats, was negligible.

"Louder!" Lester called. "We've got to waken the dead!"

He raised his hand and dropped it again.

The answering shout was frighteningly loud.

A section of the dome slid open.

A great sigh rose from the crowd. Brandy gripped Lester's arm as if he would break it.

"You see," Lester said, "the Risimians had this place ready for emergencies. The bellowing of the Gobblers closing in overhead would activate the power-damper field and lock the dome in readiness. Outside, silence would fall for ever—or until another atmosphere was established. Then another sound was needed to unlock the door."

Brandy nodded blankly, almost as if he had not heard. He was shaking like a leaf.

"N—now what?" he managed to ask.

"Now we go in," Lester said.

He looked around. The onlookers had vanished. Silently, ashamedly, they had scrambled away. The inherited impulses of fear had been too much for them. Only the Commander of Sector Six and the Resident Governor stood under the iron sky: but a woman was approaching them. It had, of course, been an easy matter for her to follow Lester; a Resident Governor's wife can appropriate any vehicle in an emergency.

"Aren't you afraid, Rue?" Lester asked huskily.

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" The doctor says you ought to be at home in bed !" she exclaimed, as she came up to him.

At Lester's side, Brandy Mireball began to laugh, fitfully and without humour. In a crisis, anything that is not the crisis releases laughter. But Lester thought he understood: Rue was concentrating on him, as he had previously concentrated on the reclamation, to exclude the chilling threat of reality. Taking her hand, he led her into the dome.

Immediately, the moveable section of wall swung back into place, imprisoning them. The two of them were alone—as they had always been.

A soft yellow light illuminated the interior of the dome. The room seemed tiny, and was as featureless as the exterior, apart from a small grille five feet from the floor; and below the grille, projecting from the wall, was an open cube large enough for a man to poke his head into.

Husband and wife had barely had time to look round before a voice spoke to them through the grille. Though it was clear, it had the quality of a recording. It spoke slowly, in Prime Galactic.

" You are the new possessors of Risim," it said. " You walk on our world. It was our world, and we loved it. But all that we loved—so it must be if you hear our voice—is now gone, obliterated. Our enemies have terrible powers: our enemies are evil. But to every race falls a time of evil and a time of good, a time of weakness and a time of strength, a time for destruction and a time for construction.

" We are prepared to leave what remains of our loved planet even to our enemies if, by the time they hear our voice, they have turned from their old ways. Accordingly, we have devised this test, to see if they are fit to possess Risim. For know that it was fair and can be made fair again.

" But we would rather that our world were dissolved into its component molecules than that it became a stronghold of evil. So we have arranged that, far below this dome, mighty engines of retribution lie ever ready to split our once fair world into the atoms from which it was created.

" The closing of the door behind you activated those engines. Even now, miles below your feet, critical conditions are slowly building up.

" This is the simple test we have devised. Five seconds—five seconds only—after our voice has stopped, the engines of

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retribution will be geared so that nothing whatsoever can stop them destroying Risim. But the fusion will not take place until twenty-eight days from today. We make that humane delay so that everybody now on Risim will have time to escape —but Risim will not escape. Its end is fore-doomed five seconds after our voice ceases *Unless someone present loves this World enough to lay down his life for it immediately.*

" We must have a sacrifice for the wrong done us.

" If a head is placed in the metal box below this grille within five seconds, it will be instantly pulverised: but Risim will be preserved to grow beautiful again, and the engines of destruction stopped for ever."

The voice ceased—and before it had done so, Ruthmary was clinging to Lester.

" You can't do it !" she screamed. " No, Lester, no, you're all I've got left now ! I love you, Lester ! For God's sake, Lester—Lester, no, let's all leave this damned—"

His clothes ripped as he pulled himself away from her. Something about not deserting Jackie, something about a man's life's work—

Instantly after the flash which neatly sliced his neck, the grille announced, coolly, " Risim is yours now. Tend it lovingly. Farewell ! "

The section of wall slid open again. Choking with tears, Ruthmary hardly saw Brandy on his knees outside, or far behind him, the ravaged slopes with their touch of green.

Brian W. Aldiss.

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In this second and concluding part of his article on the future of the worlds' navies, Kenneth Johns paints rather a grim picture of the realities to come. The consolation may be in the fact that warfare between the nations may well cancel itself out entirely so complex are the engines of attack and defence becoming

THE NUCLEAR NAVY

By Kenneth Johns

Conclusion

Whenever mankind invaded the seas he took with him his racial pastime, war, and as his technology developed so his war-tools became more complex. Any scientific discovery soon found application in warships. Now, the navies of the world are again fast evolving in the age-old balance of power between defence and offence, incorporating the latest products of electronic, nuclear and rocket engineering in the warpieces to be used in the great three-dimensional chessboard of the seas and sky.

With the day of the surface ship almost over, her fiery end written by precision nucleonic missiles, the future of marine development lies deep within the restless oceans. Submarines, fantastic in size and armament, will be the capital ships of

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tomorrow. Normal sea-traffic will also find new degrees of efficiency underwater and future ocean commerce will be carried on by nuclear-powered underwater freighters. Already the Japanese are planning a shark-shaped 30,000 ton submarine tanker whose nuclear engines will give an underwater speed of 22 knots.

The weather under the sea, beneath a thin surface layer of pendulum-like disturbance, is monotonous in its calmness. The engine power needed to drive a ship along underwater is less than that required by the same displacement of surface ship running at the same speed. Most of the energy loss takes place in battling the waves which, below the surface, are ironed out into gradually diminishing undulations completely surrounding the craft instead of beating at her with restraining fists.

Vice-Admiral Daniel Barby has stated that most important American cities could be destroyed, three-fifths of the population killed and half the strategic bomber bases—the present big stick of retaliation—rendered inoperative, by a mere thirty-five submarines appearing off the coast and firing missiles equipped with hydrogen-bomb warheads. This is not a possible horror-picture of the distant future, but a sane appraisal of tomorrow.

For submarines are being developed more rapidly than any other type of war vessel. As far as is known, the United States is the only nation possessing atomic-powered submarines. The first, the *Nautilus*, using the 'slow-fission' system, is now obsolete, and the second, the *Sea Wolf*, using the 'fast-fission' system will be surpassed in every way by the fifteen other nuclear submarines building or on order.

By 1966, the U.S. Navy will have 75 nuclear-powered submarines, each powered by two atomic engines and able to cruise underwater for months on end at a steady 30 knots. All will carry either A- or H-bomb guided missiles.

When the decision was taken that British nuclear engineering development should concentrate upon power-houses to provide electricity for the National Grid, the British Navy turned to a German invention for their underwater navy of the future. Towards the end of the last war, Dr. Walter designed a new U-boat for the German Navy and had it ever seen service there is no doubt that, even with the high standard of anti-submarine effort then available, it would have caused immense

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trouble to the Royal Navy. The invention was taken over, and today H.M. S/M *Explorer* and *Excalibur* are conventional submarines using diesel-electric engines for cruising but fitted with the Walter peroxide engine for short, high speed bursts. This fuel is similar to that used in the V-2 and is a dangerous liquid. It can give a submarine limited endurance speeds of up to 30 knots, which would be employed during attack and escape. However, these boats are years behind the atomic submarine.

Britain has also further developed the midget submarines, the famous X-craft of World War II fame. Four Shrimp-class boats, 54 feet long with a crew of five, have been built.

In the field of midget submarines, we lead the world; but the first atomic submarine for the Royal Navy will not be ready until 1960. A great deal of atomic-engine know-how is lacking but British scientists are busily engaged in making up their lee-way. One thing we do know, though. Frying chips in an atomic submarine causes a toxic gas difficult to neutralise in the long undersea cruises.

Vickers (Nuclear Engineering) Ltd., are building the British boat, and it is likely to follow the pattern established by the early *Nautilus* and *Sea Wolf*. Travelling entirely underwater from their well-buried bases, these wolves of the sea will not even need to surface to fire their mass-murder rockets.

During the later stages of World War II, Wernher von Braun, chief architect of the V-2, and a German rocket group carried out a series of test firings of underwater rockets. Launched from a submerged submarine's deck, they were solid-fuelled and smaller than the V-2; but the effect, as they leaped from the sea in gouting spumes of foam, was described as fantastic and awe-inspiring.

The latest U.S. rocket designed to be launched under the surface is the Polaris, an 8-foot diameter rocket about 40-50 feet long. It, too, is solid-fuelled. Liquid propellants are considered too dangerous and tricky to be handled in the closely confined quarters of a submarine. The Polaris may be launched directly from a water-lock in the submarine's hull, or it may be floated to the surface and fired from there. If necessary, the submarine could extend radar and radio antennae and maintain control of the missile for most of its 800 mile flight. The atomic-powered submarines must be specially designed to house the Polaris and the first is expected to be launched within five years.

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Hydrogen bombs carried by these Intermediate Range Ballistic Missiles (I.R.B.M.) will rise from the depths of the sea in spouting fountains of spray and silently, all sound lagging far behind, arc over the coastline to devastate cities, airfields and ports. The symbolic fire from the seas to destroy the works of Man will come true—if they are ever used.

The one great advantage of the IRBM fired from submarines concealed close inshore over the 5,000 mile range ICBM or the Navaho is the simple one of surprise. Radar networks will have little time to locate the intruders, lock on and launch anti-missile rockets. Stealth, sudden attack with wholesale devastation and then a stealthy retreat, will be the keynotes of future naval strategy.

But the submarine, too, is vulnerable. Submarine killers will also go underwater and war in the sea will be fought with asdic instead of radar, fought with target-seeking torpedoes and decoy units similar to the German *pillenwerfer*, a device enclosed in a bubble of air and blown out to confuse asdic in the same way that 'window' was used to deceive radar.

Magnetic detectors will vie with asdic beams as the seekers grope for the sought and the sought wait dangerously for the seekers. Anti-torpedoes will carry their own asdic to home on and destroy the would-be killers of their parent ships. Plans are already in existence and models have been tested of gigantic barges, constructed from reinforced inch-thick nylon towed smoothly and quietly through the seas by automatically-piloted tugs. Whilst mainly designed for the transportation of oil, these tow-barges could carry any form of freight. Underwater repair and refuelling bases will be built on the sea bottoms, drawing raw material from mines sunk deep in the underocean rock.

Man, retreating from the unprotected open lands will seek —and find—security in the womb of the seas.

Anti-submarine measures are among the most closely guarded of all British naval secrets. Two pinnacle-secrets on which a fraction of the veil has been recently lifted in America spell virtual extinction for the conventional submarine and represent a deadly hazard for atomic submarines.

The U.S. Navy is working on an atomically-powered torpedo equipped with an atomic warhead and which can home automatically on submarines.

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The second deals with the menace in a more wholesale way. Atomic depth charges are being developed which can blanket a very wide area; any submarines in that area are guaranteed to be crushed by the pressure waves. This points up the danger from radiation and strong measures are now being taken to investigate and prevent atomic pollution of the seas.

Any raiding submarine approaching a convoy, which would more probably than not be an underwater convoy, would be instantly detected by improved asdic and set-upon by torpedoes which she could not shake off. The mass destruction of the atomic depth charges would take place when all allied shipping had been routed clear of the target area. With these two inventions, some experts think that the end of the submarine is even more definite than that of the surface ship.

Already the Russians possess 400 submarines—more than all the other navies combined—and they are building 75 to 80 each year. It is thought that none of these submarines is atomically propelled.

To combat these new weapons, submarines must become more complex, become larger and increase the incredible flexibility of the atomic submarine which even now enables her to twist and turn like a fish. But with the increase in complexity comes an increase in size, entailing larger crews with a further size increase. The undersea leviathan, to be safe, must be able to destroy every other submarine, ship, plane or missile within a radius of at least a hundred miles.

This is the basic pattern of the navy of the future; a navy where machines will be the eyes, ears, lungs and hands of the crews; a navy where concealment is the only hope of survival. A navy which, eventually, will be entirely automatic and will put to sea with its controlling crew buried deep beneath the earth, safe in their fortress bases. A nuclear navy in keeping with our much vaunted civilisation.

Kenneth Johns.

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This month's "Profile" explains that Richard Wilson works for a global news agency, and the excellent story which follows, published originally in The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction *in America, admirably points up his profession. We can vouch for the atmosphere of the news office—last September's New York editorial was actually written in Mr. Wilson's office to the accompaniment of the clatter and roar of a dozen teletype machines.*

Q
R
M

By Richard Wilson

There used to be something in the news business known as the summer doldrums. I don't know what's become of them. There certainly wasn't any shortage of news on the night of July 17, 1956. There was a backlog of copy on my desk, waiting to be processed. Nancy Corelli, the operator, had a basketful that I'd already pencilled up. It was going off to London as fast as the RTT could handle it, which was only sixty words a minute.

Nancy, a slender pretty brunette who unfortunately happens to be married, was punching away like a demon, cussing a little in Italian, when the operator on the incoming side, across the room, yelled :

"London says ZFB, Nan. ZST from 671."

Maybe I'd better define a few terms, in case you're not familiar with news agency jargon.

To put first things first, a news agency is an outfit like AP or UP or Reuters or, in my case, World Wide. RTT is *radio teletype*. At World Wide it's an ordinary teletype that transmits copy along a land line to Press Wireless, Inc. (Prewi for short), which then beams the impulses across the Atlantic to London, where they come out again as words on a teletype.

ZFB means *fading badly* and ZST means *slips twice*—in other words, send all copy twice in succession. This is because

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atmospherics are getting at the copy, garbling it. If it's sent twice, the chances are the garbles won't be in exactly the same places and the story can be deciphered.

So what London was telling us, here in New York, was that our copy had been OK up to number 670 but that they needed repeats on everything after that to help them make it out.

Nancy pulled the tape back about ten numbers to 671 and asked me :

" You want me to go on punching, Sam, or wait till we're caught up ? "

I'm Sam Kent, night editor at World Wide.

" Let it catch up," I said. " Who knows, we may have a snap."

AP and UP have bulletins. Reuters and WW have snaps. Same thing.

" In that case I'll go out to the little girl's room and powder my nose."

While Nancy was gone, Bart, the operator on the receiving end of the RTT from London said :

" It's starting to break up here, too, Sam."

Bart made out a message from London just before the RTT was washed out completely. It said :

ZSU LAST RECEIVED 670 RELYING CABLES

ZSU means *slips unreadable*. I told Nancy when she got back. " Put on a belt," I said, " and ask Prewi what gives."

A belt is a length of perforated tape, glued into a circle, which goes through the transmitter and sends on the RTT, over and over, a series of lines that look like this :

QRA QRA DE WFK40 VIA PREWI/-NY RYRYRYRYRYRYRYRYRY
QRA QRA DEWFK40 WFK40 VIA PREWI/NY RYRYRYRYRYRYRY
RYRYRYRY

They're the call letters for the radio frequency assigned to WW by the FCC and when London can read them again they send us a ZOK. Then we take the belt off and start sending copy again.

" Prewi doesn't know what's wrong. They're trying to run it down. Anything you want cabled ? "

I thought about it. WW was in the throes of one of its economy drives and a story had to be pretty hot to warrant cabling. The last London received was 670. That was the

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story about Miss Israel refusing to pose with Miss Germany at the Miss Universe contest at Long Beach. " Old antagonisms flared tonight . . ." was what our west coast stringer had led with. Good stuff.

671 was a rehash of the Clare Boothe Luce arsenic poisoning story. That could wait.

672 was the Dodgers losing again, this time in Cincinnati, and Duke Snider getting into a rhubarb with a fan. The English couldn't care less, but London sent the scores back on its beam to Bermuda where, for some reason, they're baseball crazy. The Dodgers could wait, too.

673 was no clues in the Weinberger kidnapping. A negative story, unfortunately. No urgency on that one.

674 was the curtain-raiser on four-year-old Mike Sibole, who was to lose his left eye the next day in an operation. He'd already lost his right eye in a surgical attempt to arrest cancer of the retina. I'd cable that one later if the RTT wasn't restored.

" Nothing worth cabling now," I told Nancy. I went back to pencilling up some copy, dutifully inserting the *u*'s and changing the zeds to esses in words like *color* and *authorization* to conform with British English.

Nancy's phone rang and Prewi told her they were getting QRM on our frequency from an unidentified station and that there was no other frequency available for us at the moment. QRM is interference.

" They're working on it," Nancy said.

" OK. Take a break."

She opened her copy of *House and Garden* and I started a freshener on the steel strike. The belt went round and round, printing line after line of WFK40's.

Then the belt stopped. Sometimes it will do that. The glue holding the two ends of the tape comes loose and the little posts in the transmitter hit a blank on the tape instead of the perforations and the machine stops. Nancy put down her magazine and took out the loop to examine it.

It seemed to be all right and she was about to put it back when the RTT started clicking.

" That's funny," Nancy said. " I'm not sending."

Copy was appearing on the roll of paper in the teletype. It *was* odd because ours is a sending-only circuit. London's traffic to us came in on the receiving-only machines at Bart's side of the room.

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" Maybe Prewi put a test belt on," I said. They could do that, to check circuit trouble."

" That's no test belt. Look at it."

It certainly wasn't. It was in the form of a news story but its form was the only thing about it that made sense.

It said :

IVST, RARN, 803 YAVI (URP)—MIYALLO NEEN PRAX, FUTURE REGENT OF RARN, WAS BORN WITHOUT VARIANCE TODAY, AS FORETOLD IN THE ANNALS OF ADUMBRATION. THERE WAS GENERAL REJOICING. DURGO HAK PRAX, THE PRESENT REGENT, COMMENTED: " GOOD. NOW I CAN PREPARE FOR ELDER STEWARDSHIP."

" *Madonna* ! " said Nancy.

" Urp," I said, looking over her shoulder. " What the hell is Urp ? "

" Maybe it should be UP. I'll ask Prewi if they've got our wires crossed with United's."

" UP doesn't use Press Wireless," I said. " Besides, what kind of date-line is that ? UP has stringers in some of the damnedest places, but who ever heard of Ivst, Rarn ?"

" What's 803 Yavi ?"

" What it is I can't imagine, but where it is is where the date would be, just before the logo. If that is a logo—Urp."

" You sound like you've got gas. I'll get Prewi on it anyway." She picked up her phone.

" No, wait. Another one's coming. Let's see what it says."

This is what it said :

ESTEDDIS, O.D.K., 803 YAVI (URP)—ESTEDDIS SHREDDED VISITING BLASHTI 647 TO 5 TODAY IN A VARIANCE-FILLED THRILLER AT GLERE OVAL AND MOVED TO THE CHALLENGE STAGE OF THE TERTIARY GRIADS.

" Urp." Nancy said it this time.

" And 803 Yavi. That much is consistent. But where the hell is Esteddis ?"

" In O.D.K., obviously. Is that one of the Canadian provinces, like P.E.I. ?"

" No. And what they're talking about isn't ice hockey, either."

" Here comes another one."

We watched it. Bart wandered over from the incoming side, took a look and said, " What the hell ? Who's sending?"

" The RTT's haunted," Nancy told him. " We're getting a ghost station."

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" Somebody's kidding around," Bart said. " Some wise guy at Prewi."

" I don't think so. They don't kid like that."

The latest story was the shortest so far :

BLECH, 803 YAVI (URP)—A WAVE OF SELLING SWEPT THE WODIBLE MARKET TODAY BEFORE A VARIANCE WAS TRACED AND A RETROACTIVITY RULING NULLIFIED LOSSES.

" It's a market report," Bart said. " They trade in wodibles. But where's Blech ? "

" Exactly," Nancy said. " And what are wodibles ? *You're* a big help. Sam, remember that story we had from Ohio a couple of weeks ago ? About the astronomer who was getting radio signals from Venus ? Maybe that's what this is."

" Nuts," I said. " I think Bart's right. Somebody at Prewi's horsing around. Call 'em up. We've got copy to move."

She picked up the phone, then put it back in its cradle while she watched the newest item print itself on the machine :

HEARI
LICH, VASZ, 803 YAVI (URP)—J J J J J J J

" It's a snap," Nancy said. " Only they call it a hear. It must be pretty big—the operator's so excited he forgot to hit the figure key for the bells."

The bell on the teletype is the upper-case J.

" Something big on Venus, eh ?" I said to Nancy. " Like maybe the sun coming out ? "

" Why not Venus ? Lich, Vasz, certainly isn't in Massachusetts."

Whoever was sending found the bell key, finally, and rang it a few times, then went on with the item :

. . . THE MURANDER WORKS AT ONCH EXPLODED WITH A VENUS-SHAKING ROAR TODAY . . .

" It *is* Venus !" Nancy shrieked.

. . . AND FIRST REPORTS SAID 43 YERVI WHO HAD BEEN CONDUCTING SECRET LOCHASA RESEARCH WERE FEARED KILLED. THE EXPLOSION CAME WITHOUT WARNING AT THE VARIANCE-PRONE INSTALLATION NEAR LICH.

" You see ! You see !" Nancy was bouncing in her chair. " It is Venus ! I told you ! "

" Or else somebody with a powerful imagination," I said. " Get Prewi on the phone and see who's doing it."

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" OK, sceptical Sam. OK." She talked to somebody at the other end, then announced: " Nobody's doing it."

" Of course somebody is. Tell them to look at their monitor"

She spoke to Prewi again, then said: " They don't have a monitor on."

" Isn't that just fine ? Well, will you ask them to be so kind as to put one on, if it's not too goddam much trouble ? *Madonna* ! "

Nancy giggled and relayed my message, censoring it.

Meanwhile our friend Urp, the phantom usurper of our RTT, was carrying on in fine fettle, switching from dateline to dateline like an alien Walter Winchell.

URDI-UM-FEEB 803 YAVI (URP)—THE 44 NAMES OF ORCHANA-TU WERE RECITED IN SOLEMN GORTEMIS TODAY BY 44 YOF FROM KLEMP, 44,000 VARIANCE-FREE NOVANTIA IN TRADI-TIONAL SKON CROWDED THE OOS.

" I just had a horrible thought," I said. " Is this stuff all going to London ?"

" I guess so," Nancy said. " If it's coming out here I don't see why they wouldn't be getting it, too."

" Oh, great ! They'll think we're drunk."

KRON, 803 YAVI (URP)—A DISSUE TO CONTINUE FUNDS FOR BI-LINGUAL DIFFUSION MET OPPOSITION FROM THE ECONOMY BLOC IN THE LOWER GORB TODAY. SNEEM, A YOUNGER FROM ERST, K.V.R., DECLARED THAT THE COST OF MAINTAINING THE AUTOMATIC TRANSLATOR WAS BOTH PROHIBITIVE AND A COMPLETE WASTE.

HE FOR ONE FOUND IT DISTASTEFUL TO BE SUBJECTED TO WHAT HE CALLED " THAT BARBAROUS GUTTURALITY, ENG-LISH " EVERY TIME HIS TUNER DRIFTED.

SNEEM SAID HE APPRECIATED THE SCHOLARLY ASPECTS OF STUDYING THE CHIEF LANGUAGE OF THE ONE OTHER KNOWN INHABITED PLANET IN THE SOLAR SYSTEM BUT ASKED WHY SCHOLARSHIP WAS NOT LIMITED TO SCHOLARS INSTEAD OF BEING INFLICTED ON THE ENTIRE POPULATION!

SPEAKER DITCHIE INTERRUPTED TO SAY THERE WERE SECURITY REASONS FOR THE DIFFUSION WITH WHICH SNEEM MIGHT NOT BE FAMILIAR. SNEEM THEN MOVED FOR A CLOSED HEARING.

" NOW WE'RE GETTING SOMEWHERE," SNEEM COM-MENTED.

" So that's why their stuff is in English," I said.

" Getting less sceptical, aren't you ?" Nancy said. " They're having a hot appropriations debate in their Congress, just like we do. Only they call it the Gorb."

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" I admit the homey details enhance its credibility," I said. " Their automatic translator would seem to be more powerful than they know. And Earth's signals must be pretty strong, if they've learned English."

"Don't forget that astronomer in Ohio. He got Venus, too."

" He's a radio astronomer. There's a difference. And he only got signals, not messages."

" Of course not. He probably didn't have a teletype."

" H'm," I said. It sounded logical.

" I wonder about those security reasons they shut that fellow Sneem up with," Nancy said, re-reading the dispatch from Kron, which presumably was the capital city. " Sounds ominous."

" Let's not get *too* dramatic, Nancy."

" No ? Where do you stop ? "

A machine behind us began to chatter and produced a cable from London :

40248 EXTRAFFIC WFK40 GOOD SIGNAL BUT CONSIDERABLE QRM EXUNIDENTIFIED STATION LAST RECEIVED 670 RELYING CABLES.

" They're getting it, too," Nancy said.

" They're getting something. But if they can read it they're being pretty phlegmatic about it."

" That's only Traffic. The Second Coming wouldn't excite them. Anything you want cabled ?"

" No, thanks. We'll ride it out a while longer. It can't last forever."

" No ? Here they come again."

ALIENS OUT

KRON, 803 YAVI (URP)—PREPARATIONS FOR NULLIFICATION OF THE EARTH MENACE RECEIVED A SETBACK TODAY WITH THE EXPLOSION OF THE MURANDER WORKS AT ONCH. ELDERS SAID THE DESTRUCTION OF THE WORKS ITSELF, THOUGH SERIOUS, AND THE PRESUMED LOSS OF A SUPPLY OF LOCHASA WERE LESS DISTRESSING THAN THE REPORTED DEATH OF THE 43 YERVI.

CONCENTRATION OF SCARCE YERVI IN ONE WORKS CAME UNDER RENEWED CRTIICISM IN THE UPPER GORB AND ELDER BLANG IMMEDIATELY PROPOSED A DISSUE TO LIMIT THEIR NUMBER AT ANY CRITICAL FACILITY TO SIX. HE POINTED OUT THAT THE EARTH NULLIFICATION PROGRAM REQUIRED

BUST BUST BUST

KILL KILL KILL

ATTENTION ALL DIFFUSERS: KILL KRON ITEM ON PREPARATIONS FOR NULLIFICATION. A KILL IS MANDATORY

URP/ESTEDDIS

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Bells accompanying the kill rang for a full half minute.

"Oh-oh," Nancy said. "Some Urp forgot to throw the switch. There'll be hell to pay in their head office."

I knew what she meant. The item had been distinctly slugged "Aliens Out" and should never have been put on the beam. It must have been like AP's "NYC Out," which means the AP, having picked up an item from one New York paper, throws a switch on the teletype circuit so the item doesn't go out to competing papers.

Presumably URP's radiocasts in English were for home consumption only, to indoctrinate the Venusians. It's always useful to know your enemy's language. The "Aliens Out" slug probably was no more than a precaution; there had been no hint in URP's account of the appropriations fight in the Lower Gorb that the Venusians knew their radiocasts were piercing their cloud blanket and reaching Earth.

Nor was there any hint that the average Venusian—the man in the street in Kron, or Esteddis, or Urdi-um-Feeb—though exposed to the barbarous gutturalities of English knew there was such a thing as an Earth menace or that the Youngers and Elders in his Gorb were secretly planning an interplanetary invasion.

All at once I was thoroughly convinced it was no joke. It was too authentically complicated to be the work of some character fooling around with a teletype.

All the evidence pointed to the likelihood that the leaders of an alien race were out to give Earth the business because we had newly become a menace.

I could imagine why they might think so—our atomics, our rockets, our artificial satellites were all leading to space flight, and before long our neighbouring planets would be within range of our not-always-benevolent science.

"What do they mean by Earth nullification?" Nancy asked. "What's lochasa?"

I made the gesture of drawing my finger across my throat.

"You mean Venus is going to attack Earth?"

"It's an informed guess," I said. "All I know is what I read on their wire. The question is, what do we do about it? You believe it and I believe it, finally, but would anybody else?"

"Like the FBI, for instance?"

"Or the CIA. God knows it's no miserable little flying saucer sighting. We've got it in writing. And quadruplicate

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at that. Better save all four RTT copies—*and* the carbon paper. Has Prewi got a monitor on yet? They'd be another witness."

Nancy picked up her phone to Press Wireless and I made my decision. I dialled Operator on my desk phone and asked for the Central Intelligence Agency.

They had a man in the office four minutes after I hung up. He had been working in the building for years—I recognised him as Jonesie, one of our more literate night elevator operators. I don't know why he'd been planted there unless the CIA figured any building so full of international press services and foreign correspondents might also contain a spy.

Jonesie—the name was highly inappropriate now as I watched him go to work—looked at the Urp copy took notes from Nancy, Bart and me, talked to Prewi on the phone, checked back with Washington and then stared at the now-silent RTT.

"Was that Kron item they killed the last one you received?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," Nancy said, still a bit awed by the transformation of Jonesie, humble elevator operator, into Jones, secret agent. "It's as if they got panicky and pulled the switch to cut everybody out."

Then she jumped as the RTT started up again.

We waited tensely to see what it would say. But all we got were foxes:

THE QUICK BROWN FOX JUMPED OVER A LAZY DOG'S BACK 1234567890 PW SENDING

It was Press Wireless running a test belt.

Presently Nancy's phone rang and Prewi told her she was back on the air to London.

She shrugged and sorted through her old tape to number 671.

"Well," she asked me, "shall I put it in?"

I shrugged and turned to Jones. He shrugged too, but said decisively, "Go ahead. I'd say we've got all we can hope for here."

Nancy put the tape in the transmitter and ordinary old U.S. copy began flowing again:

W671
ARSENIC ONE (EXKENT)
NEW YORK, JULY 17 (WW)—A PAINT INDUSTRY SPOKESMAN AND A GOVERNMENT CHEMIST DIFFERED TODAY ON

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WHETHER IT WAS POSSIBLE FOR AMBASSADOR CLARE BOOTHE LUCE TO HAVE BEEN POISONED BY ARSENIC PARTICLES FLAKING OFF PAINT ON HER BEDROOM CEILING IN ROME AND INTO HER MORNING COFFEE . . .

A few minutes later we got a cable from London saying :

40402 EXTRAFFIC WFK40 QRM ENDED ZOK ZSO CEASE CABLES

" Blase bunch," I said. " Not a word about Urp. Or," I turned to Jones, " about whether your opposite number is investigating from that end."

Jones chose to be dense. " I beg your pardon ?" he said.

" MI5," I said. " British Intelligence. They must be looking into it, too."

" Must they ?" he said. He gathered papers together, leaving us one of the four copies of the Urp stories and giving me a receipt for the rest.

He was just as noncommittal with Nancy when she asked if the CIA knew of any other communications from Venus, or whether there'd been any previous suspicion of an interplanetary invasion.

Jones merely smiled and said, " Good-night. Thank you for your co-operation. I'm afraid I won't be seeing you in the elevator any more." And he was gone.

Bart's and Nancy's relief operators came in. Nancy paused at the door on her way to the subway.

" Jonesie—I mean Jones—didn't swear us to secrecy," she said. " Isn't that funny ?"

He hadn't, come to think of it. " I guess he was being realistic," I said. " Anyway, who'd believe us ?"

" I guess that's right. I'm beginning to doubt it already. *Madonna* ! Good-night, Sam."

" Good-night, Nan. Pleasant dreams."

Charlie Price, the overnight editor, came in to relieve me at 1 a.m. He had on the gloomy face he wore whenever the Dodgers lost.

" Baseball's all cleaned up," I told him, avoiding particulars so as not to rub it in. " Nothing's hanging, but you might keep an eye on the steel strike. There could be a leak about a settlement."

" The air OK ?" Charlie asked, meaning were we running ZOK to London.

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" Oh, some QRM washed us out for an hour or two but we're restored now. Some other station got mixed up on our frequency and we were getting their copy for a while. Prewi straightened it out." I nodded knowingly.

I didn't feel like going all through it with Charlie.

" Same thing happened to me a couple of years ago," he said. " France Presse copy started coming in on our machine. Couldn't make head or tail out of it. All in French."

" This wasn't quite the same thing," I said. " I left a memo for the dayside under the basket. You'll see it."

He shrugged.

" I'll look at it later. As long as the air's OK again."

" It's OK. Good-night, Charlie." I wondered how he'd react to the memo. " Everything's OK, I guess."

I hope it is.

That was twelve months ago. The CIA hasn't said a word to me since that night. There's been nothing from London, either, even in WW's confidential correspondence, to hint that Britain's MI5 is unduly alarmed. I guess things are under control.

Even so, I take an acuter interest in the state of our military preparedness now. I'm an obsessive reader of everything I can find about progress in guided missiles and high-altitude rockets and I'm an advocate of bigger and better artificial satellites, preferably armed to the teeth.

And when I drive home at night I look up into the sky quite often.

But of course if you were to ask me I'd never admit I was looking for a ship full of yervi bringing lochasa from Onch.

Madonna !

Richard Wilson

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FALSE ALARM

James White's first published story was "Assisted Passage" in the January 1953 issue of this magazine —a story subsequently anthologised in this country. It had a background drama of an alien stranded on Earth attempting to get back to the stars. The story which follows (some fifty years later in time) unravels some of the clues left by the race who came to rescue their stranded colleague. Fairly useless clues at that . . .

By James White

Davies had ceased believing in Buried Treasure at a very early age and his scepticism had included such related items as Ancient and Forgotten Documents and the Secret and Perilous Voyages in search of it. The realisation that he was now at the end of just such a treasure hunt came as a shock to his rather staid personality, but he could not dispute the evidence of his own eyes. There, half a mile away across the 'snow' of Titan lay the cluster of pressure domes which the Document had said would be here. There also lay the Treasure—not gold, of course, but something which was incalculably more valuable in this day and age: Knowledge.

It was the abandoned base of the Aliens which they had come so far and searched so long to find, and above it and around it—like a fabulous setting surrounding a jewel that is dull and cheap—there was the most beautiful sight that Davies had ever seen.

The snow of Titan stretched away to the horizon, broken occasionally by dark brown outcroppings of rock which were also streaked with white and powdered with diamond frost-crystals. Titan's frigid, methane atmosphere was dense enough to give the sky above the horizon a deep, torquoise blue tinge which shaded into star-sprinkled black overhead, and on this band of cold pure colour Saturn blazed like some splendid heraldic device. Davies was suddenly glad that he had come here; the view, apart from everything else, was worth coming nine hundred-odd million miles to see.

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" H-how soon can we get over there?" said Davies. He had the lamentable habit of stuttering sometimes when in the grip of strong emotion, but at the moment he felt too excited even to feel ashamed of it.

" Not until the slush hardens," said Mercer, the ship's A-Drive Engineer and Radioman. His face remained glued to the direct vision port as he spoke. He was a small, thick-set man with heavy features whose only vice seemed to be the inability to stop and think before speaking his mind. He asked suddenly, " Now that we've found it, and if it really is an alien base and not some hush-hush installation of our own, what are young going to do?"

Captain Silverman, the other half of the *Hannibal's* crew who had been busy with his post-landing instrument check, joined them beside the view-port at that moment. He spoke before Davies could begin a proper reply to Mercer's question.

" You will be in charge from here on in, of course," he said seriously. " But try to remember that this isn't the Nile Valley, Professor Davies, where the only protection needed is a pith helmet—assuming that is what the well-dressed archeologist wears these days. You know, I wish you had more practice handling yourself in a spacesuit . . ."

The perpetually worried look on the Captain's thin, intense face deepened slightly, and he brushed at a lock of light brown hair which threatened to fall into his right eye.

Silverman's hair had grown long during the trip out here, and Davies knew the reason. The Captain would not allow Mercer to cut it because of a tonsorial catastrophe which had occurred while Silverman had been attempting to barber the Engineer—he was afraid of Mercer getting his own back and leaving *him* nearly bald on one side. But with that great brown mane curling softly over his uniform collar, Davies thought he looked more like one of the prophets than a present-day spaceship Captain.

" . . . Anyway," Silverman went on. " Mercer will go with you the first few times. But keep constant radio contact with each other and the ship at all times—that's the only way I have of knowing if you get into trouble."

Davies nodded. "What about this slush Mercer mentioned?"

" The ' snow ' which was liquified, and partly vapourised, by the flare of our chemical landing motors," he replied. " It will be solid again by the time you are ready to go out."

" Good," said Davies, and moved towards the spacesuit locker.

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Ten minutes later Mercer and himself were at the foot of the retractable ladder which joined *Hannibal's* stern air-lock with the surface. The ship stood in the centre of a roughly circular expanse of what looked like blue-grey fused glass which crunched and tinkled faintly underfoot—the sound being transmitted through the fabric of their suits. Mercer pointed to the shock-absorber legs on the ship's four great stabiliser fins, and explained that a number of small explosive or incendiary charges would be needed to free the ship for take-off.

Together they shuffled carefully across the frozen pond which encircled *Hannibal* and onto the snow, Mercer keeping a steadying hand on Davies' arm until he had accustomed himself to the light gravity. Even then the Engineer steered a zig-zag towards their objective so as to avoid the danger of his falling or snagging his suit against out-jutting rocks in his temporarily unbalanced condition. But by the time the nearest pressure-dome was reached, Davies no longer needed the Engineer's helping hand.

" . . . A rigid-walled pressure-tent pierced for air-lock and observation windows, and similar to the semi-permanent installations used on Luna and Mars," Mercer was saying for the benefit of Silverman back at the ship. " I can see inside. It is empty, and there is a spiral stairway leading down to what must be an underground extension of the structure.

" This thing was never built by any Earth race," he went on, his voice quickening with excitement, " but the entry-lock mechanism seems straightforward enough. We could get inside with very little trouble—"

" No," Davies interrupted at that point. " I'm just as anxious as you are to get into that dome, but you must agree that some idea of the surface layout of the installation is necessary before investigating the interior."

" I suppose so," said Mercer grumpily. He had a last look through the transparent circle of plastic beside the entry-lock, then turned towards the next nearest dome.

They found that the alien base lay in a circle of about two hundred yards diameter surrounding a conical rock formation which resembled a scaled-down volcano. The pressure domes —there were eleven altogether—were merely the surface entry points for an installation which stretched for an unknown, but probably considerable, distance underground. Despite

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this, Davies was able to glimpse things through their observation windows which made him even more anxious than Mercer to get inside one of them.

In one he saw a desk and a few surprisingly ordinary chairs —though he knew that their ordinariness should not have surprised him, because one of these long-departed aliens had spent nearly two years, living breathing and passing himself as a human being on Earth. But everything he saw was an indication that the aliens had made an orderly and unhurried withdrawal from their base on Titan, and the things which they had left behind were little more than junk. Here and there were discarded items of furniture or fittings, odd pictures left hanging on walls, and even neat piles of rubbish swept into corners.

It was these floor-sweepings which had Davies burning with impatience to get inside.

There was no Rosetta Stone to help him here, Davies knew. It would be a far cry indeed from his deciphering of sand-eroded ideographs or the even more difficult parchments unearthed sometimes by his university's archeological team, but the challenge excited him. And there was, too, a certain amount of amusement to be found in the thought that he had come nine hundred million miles just to rummage in an alien waste-paper basket.

They were on their way back to the *Hannibal*, and passing close to the rocky pinnacle which dominated the base site, when Mercer halted suddenly and pointed. He said, "I thought I saw something funny at the base of that pinnacle . . ." He backed a few paces, stared hard towards the outcropping, then retraced his steps. "Maybe it was a trick of the light, but I thought I saw—just for a second—the outline of a door. Do you see anything?"

Davies looked carefully at the spot indicated, then said, "No."

Mercer was silent for a moment, then: "We've a good twenty minutes air left. I think I'll have a closer look at that rock. Coming?"

Davies nodded, then realised that it was wasted effort inside his three-quarters opaque helmet and simply followed Mercer towards the outcropping.

"What is it? What have you found?" the Captain, back in the ship, called anxiously. They had found something peculiar and had been studying it in silence. Mercer found his voice first.

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" I'm not sure," he said. " There's something funny here. To me it looks as if a six-foot by four rectangle of rock at the base of this pinnacle is foreign to its surroundings. Just as though a section of the original rock had been removed and later replaced with similar material from nearby whose cracks and fissures did not match up properly, and somebody had to chisel artificial extensions onto them—the fissures, I mean—to hide the fact. It was only by accident and a trick of the light that I noticed it at all." There was a tinge of uneasiness as well as puzzlement in his voice as he ended, "What was done out here, and why the camouflage ?"

For several seconds there was a rustling silence in Davies' head-phones, then Silverman said, " Better come back to the ship now. Maybe it is only a freak rock formation . . . ."

" You can't see it," said Mercer, " or you wouldn't say that."

The Engineer was silent during their walk back to the ship until they were on the point of mounting the ladder to the stern air-lock, then he asked suddenly, " Professor, are you sure this place is deserted ?"

The tone of the question made the hairs at the back of Davies' neck prickle. Irritated, he ignored the sensation and replied, " I've told you everything I know. My information was that the base was to be found here, and it was. The same source stated that it was abandoned eighty years ago . . . ."

I have told you everything I know, Davies repeated silently to himself as he began to feel the contagion of Mercer's uneasiness. But that did not mean that he knew *everything* . . .

So far as Davies knew it had all started some eighty years ago when an alien scoutship operating from this base on Titan had cracked up on Earth. The pilot, who had taken the name of ' Allen,' had succeeded eventually in pursuading a certain Dr. Mathewson—then in charge of a rocket experimental station—to give him a two-stage orbital vehicle, his idea being to modify this, to him, crude and antiquated vessel so that he could use it to join his friends on Titan before they left for their home system. Mathewson had been in serious trouble over the business until he had told of the exchange which ' Allen ' had made—namely, the theory and drawings for a spaceship power-plant which was both cheap and efficient beyond the wildest dreams of the rocket technicians of that time.

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The whole affair had been so thickly smothered in Security blankets that it had suffocated, died and been forgotten—forgotten, that was, until a colleague of Davies' interested in the Cold War period of recent history had stumbled across the relevant documents. He had mentioned them to Davies, jokingly, because he was of the opinion that they were some form of hoax—a complicated attempt at misdirection similar perhaps, to the classic Man Who Never Was of an earlier period. But Davies had been interested enough to do a little digging.

Dr. Mathewson, the Security officials and the technicians who had been attached to the experimental station had all died in the interim, of course, but Davies uncovered two very intriguing facts. One: the present-day method of propulsion in spaceships was called the Allen, or A-, Drive. And Two: try as he could, Davies could find no trace of an inventor of this priceless boon to space-travel.

It had been quite a struggle then to convince his university of the desirability of searching Titan for traces of an alien base. But eventually, after Davies had made a nuisance of himself about the project for nearly six months, they had grudgingly agreed to finance a small expedition and the tiny *Hannibal* together with Davies and its two-man crew had been dispatched. If—a very big 'if'—Davies found anything, then a fully-equipped expedition would, of course, follow.

Well, thought Davies as he climbed out of his spacesuit, we found the base. When we return with the news, specialists in all fields will come swarming out to this product of an alien civilisation to gather up the crumbs of a vastly superior alien science left by that eighty-years-gone expedition. And who knew but that their work would be substantially assisted by a translation of the alien language performed by one Walter S. Davies, Doctor of Philosophy, etc, etc. . . .

Davies pushed that pleasant day-dream out of his mind as he grew aware that Captain Silverman was talking to him.

"I've been busy in the galley while you were out," Silverman said as he helped Davies stow away the suit on its special hanger. "After we've eaten I suppose you want to go out again?"

Davies nodded. "This time I intend to effect an entrance," he said, then catching the yearning, almost hungry expression on the Captain's thin face he added, "No reason why you can't come, too."

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"Sure you can come," said Mercer loudly. "The ship won't run away."

Silverman fought a brief and losing battle with his strong sense of Duty. Curiosity won. He said, "Thank you, I'll come."

They entered the alien base with very little trouble to find that it contained a residual atmosphere of nearly breathable density—a tribute to the eighty-years-gone builders of the installation. On the way out from the ship Davies had several times stressed the importance of care in handling artifacts and papers, citing instances where priceless manuscripts had been ruined through careless handling by ignorant workers at an excavation site. Nobody, he said, was to touch anything until he had at least photographed it in relation to other objects in the room, or exactly as the aliens had left it. He was, therefore, all ready to tear a lengthy strip off the Engineer when Mercer automatically and unthinkingly flipped the toggle on a something which looked like a light switch at the entrance to one of the compartments. But the angry word remained unuttered, because it was a light switch and the lights came on!

The investigation proceeded in high excitement and, with more than adequate lighting, at a steadily accelerating rate after that. They found that the base extended far underground and had living quarters for at least three hundred. There were administrative offices, labs and workshops—all stripped of the equipment which might have given them some idea of the work which had been carried out here. But there were clues to be found in the discarded papers and magazines and in the damaged or forgotten gadgets lying here and there, if Davies could unlock the language in which they were printed.

Mercer and Silverman were literally dancing with impatience during the first two hours: they wanted to know how and why the base was powered after all this time. Davies finally gave up the attempt to keep them with him. Their highly technical cross-talk continued to come to him over his suit radio as they tried to trace the Base's lighting circuits back to a main power source.

Only one thing drove them back to the ship eventually: hunger.

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Between and during mouthfuls the two ship's officers discussed in tones of great awe the power room of the alien base. Apparently power came from storage batteries, but the lines running from these small two-foot cubes of grey metal indicated a storage capacity that was incredible. If Earth science could analyse and duplicate those batteries it would be the equivalent of carrying a power station in a suitcase. The potentialities were vast beyond belief, Mercer and the Captain agreed, and it was several minutes before the latter remembered his manners enough to ask Davies how he had made out in his own particular field.

" Well, there is plenty of printed material lying about," Davies replied carefully. " Once I'm able to translate it—"

" But how can you ?" Silverman broke in suddenly. " As I see it, in order to translate a hitherto unknown language you must first have a . . . a sort of bridge—passages written both in the unknown language and in one already known so that you can compare them, and transpose words or phrases. A sort of Rosetta Stone, in fact. But this is a completely *alien* language . . . "

Davies found himself warming to the Captain. It was nice to find someone intelligent enough to appreciate another specialist's difficulties. He smiled and said, " But I have a Rosetta Stone, of sorts." He pointed suddenly. " Him ! "

Mercer choked, spluttered, then got his breath back enough to exclaim, " Me ? But my specialities are electronics and the A-Drive generators—"

" A product, as we now know, of alien science."

" But I don't know anything about languages . . . ! "

" That doesn't matter," said Davies, waving the Engineer to silence. He spent a moment ordering his thoughts, then went on, " We are trying here to translate a language without a single clue as to its structure, the number of letters in its alphabet, or anything else at all beyond the fact that it belongs to a highly-advanced, scientific civilisation.

" But the work of the alien expedition seems to have been pretty comprehensive," Davies continued, his eyes still on Mercer's puzzled face, " and there are all sorts of charts and technical literature lying around. Well, I want you to go over those papers with me.

" You can see my idea now, I expect: a natural law or a chemical element is the same no matter what the language used to express or describe it. So if we find, say, a radio

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circuit diagram with the usual list of component values appended, you may be able to tell me that such-and-such a squiggle is the alien equivalent of a resistor or condenser—I wouldn't expect you to read the whole diagram, naturally—and we would have approximate meanings for a couple of alien words.

"The same applies to the Periodic Table of Elements, which would furnish a clue to their system of numbering . . ."

Suddenly excited, Mercer said, "It might work at that. But—"

"But it will be a long, tedious job," Davies said. "The things I've mentioned will only give us a toe-hold on their language, nothing more. But a beginning is all I ask."

Davies and Mercer rose and began climbing into their spacesuits again, but Captain Silverman made no attempt to follow. He said, "I'm tired. It's been twenty hours or more since I've had any sleep, so I think I'll sling a hammock in the control room—that way I can hear you on the radio if you get into trouble. I'd advise you two to get some rest, too." A sudden, jaw-stretching yawn overtook him and he rubbed his eyes. As a parting shot at Mercer, he added, "The base won't run away, you know."

But the Engineer and himself were too excited to think of sleep. In five minutes they were outside again, stepping out confidently towards the base. Davies had begun to get the hang of the long-striding and forward-leaning walk required for efficient movement in Titan's light gravity. But there was one cloud marring his otherwise sunny sky—a very small thing, really, but he might as well dispose of it now so that Mercer and himself could get down to the really important work.

"Mr. Mercer," he said lightly, "from overhearing the discussion of the Captain and yourself a few minutes ago, I know that you're itching to finish off a little investigation of your own. If you don't mind we'll attend to that first, otherwise you'll be no use to me at all."

Mercer chuckled, then suddenly he became serious. "The big mystery has to do with the power lines radiating from what I call the battery room," he explained. "I'm puzzled, because over half of the power available is not accounted for within the base—several of the power cables just disappear into a wall. The position of this wall, however, is close to that

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occupied on the surface by the pinnacle of rock I was suspicious about earlier. I can't explain it, but I have the feeling that that pinnacle is the centre of this base in more ways than one . . ." He trailed off into silence, then added awkwardly, "But thanks for letting me get this particular bee out of my bonnet, Professor. I'm very curious about this business, but didn't like to ask . . ."

Davies passed the thanks off with an embarrassed grunt. They altered direction to head towards the pinnacle.

At its base Mercer came close to Davies, flicked off the toggles of both their suit radios, then touched his helmet to the Professor's. Strangley muffled after the tinny clarity of the suit phones, his voice came through to a rather startled Davies.

"Don't be alarmed," Mercer said. "I'm going to try climbing this thing, and don't want the Captain to know about it. He would only worry and spoil his snooze—or maybe even forbid it. So when I switch our suit radios on again, keep all mention of climbing out of the conversation. That way, unless he goes to the view-port, he'll think we're just talking about something inside the base."

With their radios operating again Mercer turned and began heaving himself aloft with the ease of a practised rock climber. After a moment's hesitation, Davies followed him at a slower pace.

"Well, well," said Mercer, when Davies reached the Engineer's position. "What have we here?" Together they stared at a something which resembled nothing so much as a nest of copper wires containing a single crystal egg. The nest was about six inches in diameter, the crystal roughly two inches, and though the device occupied the extreme tip of the pinnacle, there was enough shoulder to the outcropping to hide it from an observer at ground level.

"There's something funny about this, too," Mercer went on, indicating the rock surface to which they clung. "I've the feeling it's faked, possibly an extension of the original pinnacle made to hide the leads to this gadget up here . . ."

All at once Davies was not listening to Mercer anymore. He felt himself sweating. Before his eyes a crooked, black line had appeared in the rocky surface, widening rapidly and sprouting other black lines which likewise widened and sprouted. *Cracks*! he thought wildly, then suddenly he was

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falling, Mercer was falling and the surface to which they had been clinging had broken up and was falling with them into darkness. For a fleeting instant he realised that Mercer was right, the tip of the rock pinnacle had been a mere shell of plastic which had disintegrated under their combined weights, then his mouth opened in a cry of fear and astonishment as he plummeted downwards.

When he hit it was with not quite enough force to break his neck or damage his spacesuit. Mercer had been equally lucky; Davies saw the Engineer's suit lamp playing around the walls of the circular chamber into which they had fallen as he searched for and found a light switch. With the chamber brightly lit Mercer turned and advanced anxiously on his still recumbant body.

Davies relieved the other's anxiety by climbing painfully to his feet.

Back in the *Hannibal's* control-room Captain Silverman was shouting himself hoarse. "Mercer! Professor!" his voiced dinned in their ear-phones, "What's wrong? Somebody shouted! What's happening . . . ?"

In a sheepish voice Mercer told the Captain what had happened, and assured him that they were both unhurt. Captain Silverman then told Mercer a few things, mainly concerning what he thought of supposedly responsible officers who took stupid risks with the safety of others as well as themselves. Davies came in for a couple of back-handers as well—the Professor was surely old enough, Silverman insisted, to know better than to join in a foolhardy stunt like this—but it was the Engineer who came under the heaviest fire. And not only was the Captain's tone cutting, his sarcasm was hooked, barbed and grooved for poison.

While this verbal flaying was going on Mercer was silent, but he had discovered a metal trap-door in the floor of the chamber and a ladder leading downwards. He had ignored the torrent of abuse and recrimination to the extent of descending it to explore, and when his head emerged from the opening a few minutes later, Silverman had run dry.

"I'm, er, afraid we can't get out, Captain," he said hesitantly. "When you're coming you'd better bring ropes."

Silverman didn't say anything to that, he had already said it all.

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While they were waiting for the Captain to arrive with tackle from the ship to haul them out, Mercer and Davies began a close examination of their surroundings. They were in a circular room of roughly five yards diameter which had been hollowed out of the original rock outcropping, then covered by a thin, plastic shell treated to simulate rock on the outside.

In the centre of the room stood a tall, enigmatic piece of apparatus which they had narrowly missed in falling. Several of the heavy power lines about which Mercer had been so curious sprouted from the floor and disappeared into this imposing mechanism—which Mercer, after much peering and nosing around it, had guessed to be some form of communicator. Pointing to a silvery rod near its top he said that this was probably the antenna. However, as the rod was totally enclosed by a sphere of copper mesh it was obvious that the signal produced could not go out into the normal either. Also, the equipment was apparently activated by an impulse which should reach it via the metal bird's-nest they had seen just before their fall.

". . . Another thing which puzzles me," Mercer said as they stared at the device, " is the amount of power the thing uses. It must operate for a split second at tremendous overload, then burn out—those power lines go right into it without fuses or safety cut-offs of any kind.

" And," he continued, " when I went down that trap in the floor I discovered that this place originally had an entrance at ground level before it was sealed up—I'd swear it was at the place where we saw the peculiarities in the rock the first time we came by. So here we have a gadget which was built, carefully hidden and sealed up on completion, and is triggered off by an impulse of some sort generated by that copper and crystal thing up top."

Mercer took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. In the phones it sounded like trees rustling in a high wind.

" I'm beginning to suspect," he went on suddenly, " that the alien expedition's chief purpose was the building of this thing. Otherwise, why go to all this trouble to hide it?" Worriedly, he ended, "This business is beginning to scare me."

Despite the Engineer's uneasiness Davies was inclined to feel more afraid of the things Silverman might say when he had them back on the ship. Technically he, Professor Davies, was the leader of this expedition, but the Captain had been a very exasperated man.

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But the expected lecture was not forthcoming, and during the two busy weeks which followed, Silverman scarcely mentioned the incident.

The greater part of those two weeks had been happy for Davies, with the happiness which comes only when a man is gladly flogging himself to death at the work which he loves. He had lost count of the meals he had missed and the sleep which he owed himself. His eyes were bloodshot and felt like hot, gritty pebbles in his head and altogether his face showed all the symptoms of a person on a protracted binge—an intellectual binge, in this case. During the past few days, however, a sour note had crept into this bone-weary but happy existence, and for the life of him Davies could not find the reason for it.

It was not that the two ship's officers had been uncooperative. Far from it, Silverman and Mercer had spent a great many hours with him poring over alien charts and papers. So much so that Davies' progress in the translation of the alien printed language was more than satisfactory. But it had been work that, because of the monotony and sheer mental drudgery involved, was very much unsuited to the temperaments of the two men. It was only natural, therefore, that they spend more and more time inside the pinnacle of rock which housed the only alien device in the base which appeared to be complete.

Davies had a highly intriguing and complex jigsaw puzzle of his own to piece together—the alien language. Why then should he begrudge the other two their fun?

This was the sort of reassuring question Davies had asked himself after first noticing the subtle change in the relations between the two ship's officers and himself. But he had always been sensitive to emotional atmosphere and now could no longer disregard the feeling that Silverman and Mercer were hiding something from him. They were a little too casual when he asked questions, their tones a little too high-pitched. And had they not, of late, initiated a new method of concealment? When out at the pinnacle together were they not being deliberately *too* technical in their conversation, so that Davies listening to them on the suit radio circuit had no idea at all what they were discussing . . . ?

And now they had taken things a stage further. Either they had stopped talking altogether, or good old safety-drill conscious, radio-at-all-times Silverman had taken to switching

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off his suit radio for long periods. Mercer's, too, because in Davies' phones there had been nothing for the past hour but a humming silence.

"Silverman! Mercer! Come in please!" he shouted suddenly. Silence answered him.

Unconsciously, he had stopped to listen. A long corridor which led towards the base's administration section stretched out in sharply diminishing perspective before him. The lighting was bright but restful. Davies was conscious of other corridors and compartments all around him, below him and above him, and he felt suddenly very much alone. He was frightened for some reason—not, he told himself hastily, because of the strangeness of his surroundings, or of any ghosts which the departed aliens might have left behind. If there had been any such, Davies had learned enough about the aliens to know that their ghosts would not have been the terrifying kind. But what was he afraid of?

Maybe I'm just overtired, Davies told himself. *When we take off tomorrow I'll sleep all the way back to Earth, and not look at a single one of those alien books that I've packed away. When we're home I'll look back and laugh at these suspicions . . .*

His silent conversation with himself was suddenly interrupted by the voice of Mercer erupting from his phones.

"All set," the Engineer said. His voice sounded strained, Davies thought. Then: "Give me two minutes to get clear, then switch on!"

"Right," the voice of Captain Silverman answered. There was silence then except for the regular, tinny rustlings of someone breathing hard.

They had been at the pinnacle, Davies knew, but what were they doing? He called again, "Silverman! Mercer! Answer me! I've been trying to call you up . . ."

"And we've been trying to call *you*," Silverman interrupted. "But don't let it bother you, Professor. Probably it's just a fault in your radio . . ." As if in corroboration of this theory there followed a few seconds of intermittent transmission which chopped whatever Silverman had been saying into gibberish, then silence.

He's lying, Davies told himself silently. Even over the phones he had been able to detect the false note in the Captain's voice—Silverman was not a good enough liar. He had *not* been trying to call Davies, and that intermittent contact

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which was supposed to simulate a faulty set must have been produced by the rapid switching on and off of the Captain's radio. Davies turned quickly and began retracing his steps. He was determined to find out *why* Silverman was lying, and whatever other funny business was going on, right this minute.

Suddenly there was a short, ear-splitting burst of static in his phones. Simultaneously the corridor lighting dimmed, flickered, then slowly returned to its former brightness. All at once there was a brightness in Davies' mind also, a brightness that revealed in stark detail the answer to the puzzling behaviour of Silverman and Mercer. Suddenly he *knew* what they had done, and more, what they must be intending to do next. He had to stop them !

Davies broke into a run.

Breathing hard as he scrambled awkwardly up the spiral stairways that led to the surface, Davies' mind began jumping from present time here on Titan back to the period of the marooned ' Allen ' eighty years ago, then back again.

Suppose ' Allen ' had been unable to rejoin his friends on Titan before they left for home. The way Davies saw it now, the aliens might leave behind them a concealed signalling device which he could use to call someone to pick him up. Something like the carefully hidden apparatus in that hollowed-out rock.

Davies was remembering what Mercer had told him about that peculiar device in the pinnacle: it operated for a split-second at tremendous overload, it was activated by the nest of crystal and copper wire surmounting it, and the signal which it emitted was not propagated through the normal ether. Obviously it was a signalling device left by the aliens for ' Allen's ' use if he should reach Titan too late. But 'Allen ' had made it and the alien had not thought it worth while to dismantle the transmitter.

Nothing more than a simple position fix could be transmitted on a signal of such short duration, Davies thought, a simple distress signal meaning ' Here I am, pick me up !' But that would be enough for a life-boat to be dispatched to aid the person in distress, and life-boats did not as a rule stop to query the origin of a distress call . . .

He had to stop them, Davies thought desperately as the spiral brought him into one of the pressure-domes and he

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began wrestling with the lock mechanism. This was the sort of incident which started wars.

Outside, Davies saw that his worst fears were realised in that the alien distress-signal was already on its way: the rock outcropping together with the communicating device which it had housed was a heap of fused slag surrounded by a pool of steaming, bubbling snow. Mercer had succeeded in activating the transmitter, and he had been correct in saying that it operated on a ruinous overload. He wondered briefly if the Engineer had been caught in that terrific flare of energy. But then he saw a figure running clumsily towards the *Hannibal* and away from the slagged-down pinnacle. That would be Mercer. And the other figure which he could see in the shadow of one of the ship's stabiliser fins would be Captain Silverman.

The Captain was bent over, working at something on the ground. Davies started running towards the ship, too.

He was less than forty yards from the ship when Silverman and Mercer—the Engineer had reached it well ahead of him—saw him. They must have decided that it was useless pretending that his suit radio was faulty any longer, for there was a click and the Captain's voice came to him. Silverman's tone was one of surprised innocence. The surprise was probably genuine.

"Professor! What are you doing here? You said that you had at least six hours work to do inside the base . . . ?"

A mixture of fear, anger and shortness of breath made it impossible for Davies to say anything coherent at first, but finally he burst out, "You c-can't do it!" He gesticulated at the little red and orange sticks lying at the Captain's feet, singly and in small, wired-together bundles. Red was for incendiary and orange for explosive, Davies knew. "You can't do it," he repeated. "It—it's murder!"

Silverman was silent for a moment, then he said carefully, "I don't understand you. These explosive and incendiary pencils are for the purpose of splitting and melting the ice from around our shock-absorber legs, otherwise the splashout from the chemical motors might melt our stern off before the ice was softened enough to allow us to pull free. Surely I explained all this to you before."

"You did," said Davies angrily. "But you also said it was dangerous to set them off too close together. Why, then, have you got them tied together in bundles and with detonators wired to each of them . . . ?"

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" I'm afraid, Captain," Mercer broke in at that point, " he knows or has guessed what we intend doing, so we can drop the pretence that these handy little bombs are for melting ice . . . " He turned and addressed Davies directly.

" To put things bluntly," Mercer said, " we have listened to you talking about the benefits which may eventually come from the investigation of this base, and the Captain and I think that you are being far too optimistic. Certainly the things discovered here will give pointers to new lines of research, and the stuff in the battery room alone will be of enormous value. But we have decided to try for something really big. Something that will put Earth and the human race on an equal, or nearly equal footing with the aliens who visited here, something that will—"

" Give us the stars ?" asked Davies coldly.

Mercer was taken aback somewhat by Davies' stealing of his punch line. He hesitated, then said, " Exactly."

The Engineer had a lot more to say, but it was only the filling-in of details on the plan which Davies had deduced in broad outline already. The distress signal had gone out and now it was only a matter of waiting until the alien equivalent of a life-boat arrived. Silverman and Mercer would take this unsuspecting vessel by force, using explosives or thermite or both to disable its air-lock so that it could not take off again. They would try not to harm the pilot, of course, unless he showed resistance. But the main idea was that they would be in possession of an alien ship equipped with interstellar drive in full working order. With such a model to work from, Earth would soon be in possession of the drive also.

There was no need, Mercer ended, to tell the Professor what that would mean for their race. The motives of the Captain and himself in doing this were of the very highest . . .

Just for a moment Davies found himself caught up by the fanatical enthusiasm of Mercer, the man who was going to hand humanity the stars on a clean plate, then a measure of sanity returned to him. He said, " No ! The risk is too great, quite apart from the ethics of the situation which you aren't considering at all. You know full well that the alien pilot will show resistance—you would in his place. And supposing you try to take his ship and fail ? You will have made an enemy of a culture which could probably beat us with one hand tied behind its back—"

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"We have the approach to the ship all worked out," Silverman put in quietly, "and expect very little trouble. And anyway, there is a strong possibility that the life-boat will be automatically controlled and therefore unmanned—"

"At this distance?" Davies interrupted scornfully; then, "*Think*, man! You've got so many stars in your eyes they're blinding you! We'll get to the stars soon enough, never fear and when we do we want to have friends out there, not enemies . . ."

Captain Silverman interrupted him again at that point. He said that they were not sure of the speed at which the alien star-drive operated—it might be instantaneous for all he knew—and suggested that Davies stay in the control-room until the alien life-boat had landed and been dealt with. It was clear that Silverman, in a quieter way, was just as blindly enthusiastic as the Engineer. His suggestion was simply a polite order.

The control room illumination had been dimmed for better outside seeing, and radar swept the sky above and around them. Mercer paced restlessly up and down the small cleared area of deck. The Captain sat still except for his eyes, which moved regularly from the direct vision port to the radar screen and back, like a man watching a slow-motion tennis match. His forehead was damp.

Suddenly the radar went *beep*. With hardly a glance at the screen the two officers leapt to the direct vision port. Slowly, Davies followed them. He saw the tiny star which moved against the backdrop of other stars, saw it grow larger as he watched. He felt suddenly too weary to talk to the others, to make a last plea for sanity.

He heard Silverman and Mercer catch their breath.

There were too many stars in the sky, far too many. And more were flickering into existence every minute. Like a great metropolis lighting up after a power failure, great loops and lines and patterns of lights criss-crossed the sky. Some of the stars were close enough for Davies to see that they were not points of light, but slim, shining needles—ships, thousands of them, singly and in vast formations, taking up station around Titan.

They were the biggest things that Davies had ever seen.

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It had been a very bad moment for them when the aliens found their wavelength and started whistling and bubbling and chirping at them—Davies had been nearly paralysed with fear—and worse when an alien with a fair knowledge of English began asking for the positions of Earth's main population centres. Meanwhile, more and more ships had been winking into existence around Titan, so that Saturn was almost hidden by their close packed ranks. But somehow he had forced himself to reply to that alien voice, and had quickly found out that this was not an invasion but something else entirely. The great swarm of ships left very quickly after that, all but the one which carried the alien with the knowledge of English.

This one had some highly pertinent and testy remarks to make before he, too, left for home.

Watching, a greatly chastened Silverman and Mercer preparing the *Hannibal* for take-off, Davies remembered a few of the alien's remarks and felt his face burning with shame. When he spoke he was simply thinking aloud rather than explaining what had happened to the two officers; they must have a good idea already.

He said: " We were right in assuming that the communicator left by the aliens was meant to send a distress signal. But it was supposed to operate when a certain type of radiation reached its receptor—the radiation emitted by a suddenly unstable Sun. It was an automatic Fire Alarm of a type placed in all inhabited solar systems—with or without the knowledge of the inhabitants—whose purpose was to summon help in the form of transports from all over the Galaxy to evacuate the system threatened with destruction. In effect, we broke the glass and pulled the handle without realising what we were doing . . . "

Davies fell silent. In his mind's eye he was still seeing that vast array of ships. And the mental picture was mixed up somehow with a dream he had had as a child—and had shared with so many other children of his age at that time. Only now the ambition was not just for himself alone but for h's whole race.

Will we ever, he wondered, *grow up and drive fire-engines like that . . .?*

James White

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